

NELLE LAMARR

ALL

MY

Words
can't
hurt you...

...But
people
can.

LIES



A Killer Psychological Thriller

ALL MY LIES

NELLE LAMARR



**INKUBATOR
BOOKS**

OceanofPDF.com

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For my beloved father who taught me never to steal or to lie.

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Good writers borrow; great writers steal.

—Anonymous

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PROLOGUE

I stare at the blank page on my computer screen.
Why won't the words come?
Because this is hardly a place to write a grocery list.
Let alone a novel.
I'm trapped in a cage.
Locked up behind bars like a tiger at a zoo.
Or some serial killer in solitary confinement.
Prison would be heaven compared to this living hell.
A cold draft seeps through the cracks in the walls.
It's pouring outside. Rain pounds the roof.
Shivering, I hug myself to ward off the ice in my blood.
The fear in my soul.
A voice, rapt with rage, shoots through the room.
"Seventy-five thousand words. Do you hear me? Do it or die."
My captor acts like I have no choice.
The truth is, I don't.
I've already signed my life away.
You have to believe me. The end awaits me.
Someone, please save me.
For once, I'm not telling a lie.

PART 1

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CHAPTER ONE

“Sloan, you’re two minutes late!” she snaps after pushing up a sleeve of her Blackglama mink coat and gazing down at her glistening gold watch, the single piece of jewelry she wears. It circles her bony wrist.

I glance down at my cheap digital watch. It jumps a second. It’s now 9:03 a.m.... so I’m three minutes late. *Fire me.*

Her gaze returns to the blank sheet of paper sitting in the carriage of her blood-red IBM Selectric typewriter. Circa 1985. It’s the only thing she writes with; she wants nothing to do with computers, let alone technology in general. She wrote her first bestseller on it and she will write her last bestseller on it. To me, it seems so complicated, but I guess it’s her lucky charm, so to speak. The well-used sculpted keys have produced thirty bestsellers. Thirty-one if you count the untitled book she’s working on now. Her WIP—aka work-in-progress. It’s almost done. She’s been working on it for over a year and has been very secretive about the plot. No one, not even her agent or publisher, has read a word or has any idea what it’s about. She claims it’s like nothing she’s ever written. She says it’s her masterpiece. That it’s personal.

A three-inch high stack of paper is perched on her shiny Louis the Whoey desk to the left of the typewriter. Her latest manuscript. The top page is turned over so I can’t see a word of it. Each novel averaging four hundred pages and often requiring several drafts, it pains me to think about how many trees she’s killed. She doesn’t

have a recycling bin or a shredder. Old drafts she simply burns in her fireplace. "It's safer that way," she once told me. "I don't need some homeless person or prankster going through my trash and finding one of my manuscripts that they'll publish under *their* name. The gall of it!"

Barbara deplores the world, the state of it, and this is pretty much why she never leaves Evergreen, her 1920s Tudor-style mansion. And has become a recluse. "People," she says, "are so overrated." If you ask me, I think she's agoraphobic.

Without so much as looking up at me from her burgundy velvet throne chair, she continues to berate me, her husky voice cantankerous and contemptuous. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Good morning to you, too! I grumble to myself. Not once in the two and a half years I've worked for her has she ever greeted me with a cheery smile.

I say nothing.

Meet my boss. Barbara Van Wyck, the sixty-year-old (well, that's what I think as she's never disclosed her age) reigning Queen of Suspense. The international bestseller whose novels have been translated into thirty-two languages, sat weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller lists, and have won numerous prizes, including the prestigious Edgar Award, ITW Thriller Award, and most recently, this year's Goodreads Choice Award for Best Thriller & Mystery Book. Critics say she has redefined the thriller genre for the contemporary world, calling her the "Patricia Highsmith of our times."

When I took this job, I thought it was a dream come true. It sure seemed to beat waitressing at The Village Pizzeria. At least on paper. An aspiring novelist who'd failed to launch with the one young adult book I wrote after grad school, I thought I'd found a mentor. Someone who could inspire me. Guide me. Help me get over my writer's block and write my next novel. Boy, was I wrong. So, so wrong. She's zapped every ounce of creative energy out of me. She works me to the bone and when I get home at night, I'm either too brain dead or too ragey to write a word. Little did I know that Barbara goes through assistants like water. Most have not lasted a year. I've

broken the record at over two. If I didn't need the money so badly, I'd quit too.

Barbara snaps at me again. As a cocktail of resentment bubbles up inside me, I simply apologize for being late.

"Where would you like me to set down your coffee?" I ask, shifting the brown bag to my other hand. It's part of my job to make a stop every morning at The Village Coffee Shop to pick up a double espresso. The reason I'm late is that there was an unusually long line because one of the coffee machines wasn't working.

"Honestly, need you ask?" I can see her doing an eye roll behind her rose-tinted, cat-eye spectacles even though she still hasn't looked my way.

The truth is I do. No matter where I set the coffee cup down, it's never exactly where she wants it. She always chides me.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

She doesn't give me a chance to settle into my work area, a small round walnut table and back-killing damask chair tucked in a corner of her library-slash-office across from her. Where I'm stationed all day and get paid to be at her beck and call. To do her research. Look up words for their proper spelling and synonyms. Check her book reviews and Amazon rankings. Monitor Google Alerts and gossip. Answer her calls on her landline (she has no cell phone). Compose her dictated letters on my laptop. Maintain her schedule. And run her errands.

The misanthrope wants nothing to do with social media. Nor understands it. She thinks TikTok is some kind of breath mint. So, I handle that too.

And that's just for starters.

Still dressed in my quilted puffer coat, beanie, and gloves, my backpack with my laptop slung over my shoulders, I remove the paper cup from the bag and trudge to her desk. The repulsive scent of cigarettes and booze, embedded in her thirty-year-old fur, which the cheapskate got for free when she reluctantly agreed to one of the brand's "What Becomes a Legend Most" campaigns, wafts up my nose. It mixes with the musky perfume she always wears and makes me nauseous (and just think about how many poor, innocent little creatures died in the making of her coat!). She never takes it off.

Even in the summer. I think she sleeps in it. To be honest, my guess is she'll die in it... most likely hunched over her ancient keyboard.

Her porcelain cup and saucer are already on the desk on the other side of the typewriter. A creature of habit, Barbara will absolutely not drink anything out of a paper cup; she thinks it's gauche. Something only peasants would do. She doesn't use paper plates or plastic utensils either. The woman's diet consists of coffee, booze, and cigarettes. Her only solid food is a daily prenatal vitamin and God only knows why she takes them at her age. Maybe they possess the secret to longevity, though when I researched them, I saw no evidence of the sort.

Her eyes glued to the blank sheet of paper in the carriage of the typewriter, she shouts out at me, "Sloan, what's taking so long?"

I don't tell her I'm thawing out from the extreme cold. My feet and fingers are numb; they tingle like pins and needles. When I can finally wiggle my toes, I pick up my pace.

About to set the paper cup down next to her monogrammed silver flask of cognac, her cream and sugar substitute, the plastic lid pops off, and the piping hot liquid, the color of her mink, pours all over her desk.

"Dear Lord!" she shrieks, gazing at the spillage. "Look what you've done!"

My heart leaps to my throat. Thankfully, the coffee hasn't spilled on her keyboard or manuscript. Or on her coat. I fumble for a napkin in the bag. *Shit*. There are none. In a panic, I start blotting up the mess with the palms of my gloves. The inky stains will ruin my shearling-lined suede finds. Chances are I'll never find another pair like them again, at least at the bargain price I paid, and my fingers will freeze. And have to be amputated due to frostbite.

The coffee trickles down the sides of the gleaming ormolu desk, narrowly missing my imitation Uggs.

"You imbecile!" she screams as I get down on my hands and knees to clean up the mess on the floor.

You've heard of Snow White, right? Of course. Sometimes I think that I, Sloan White, am like her, a poor servant girl at the beck and call of the evil, narcissistic Queen of Suspense. She even has a gold leaf mirror on the wall behind her desk that she glints into with her

Disney-green witch eyes whenever she needs inspiration or validation. Maybe she'll poison me with an apple; I'll fall into a deep sleep and a handsome prince will awaken me and I'll live happily ever after. Fat chance. Living in family-oriented Maplewood, New Jersey, where the single population is zero, should I die, the chance of meeting my Prince Charming is next to nothing. And so is a romantic kiss.

Often I wonder if one's name dictates the person you become. Like if my name were Ariana Grande, would I be standing here being berated by some full-of herself diva? I. Don't. Think. So.

"I—I'm sorry," I stutter.

"Speak only when spoken to," she hisses as she eyes me with disdain.

The truth is I'm a klutz and have always been accident prone. Well, except for the time...

I put the brakes on that thought. It comes to a screeching halt. I don't want to relive that day. The secret I harbor.

"Go out and get me another espresso!" Barbara barks as I dab away the final remnants of the spill. "Actually, make that two because Margo is coming by later this morning."

Margo Bancroft is her literary agent. A woman whose presence could turn a hot espresso into an iced coffee. It must be a surprise visit because this is the first time I'm hearing about it. I wonder if it has something to do with the fight they had on the phone the other day. One I overheard snippets of. In the most threatening of tones, Barbara said she was going to drop Margo, her longtime forever agent, if she didn't get her a high seven-figure advance for her new book as well as a deadline extension. I swear she was breathing fire.

Her voice still heated, she brings me back to the now. "And while you're in town, I need you to pick up a few other things." The Barbarian yanks out the blank piece of paper in her typewriter carriage, then her Montblanc gold and black fountain pen from her top drawer. With the pen that costs more than my weekly salary, she scribbles a list and hands me the sheet of paper. A dozen things in total ranging from her prenatal vitamins to some premium brandy.

Leaving behind my backpack with my laptop, I fold the list in half and slip it into a coat pocket. With most of the stores not opening

until ten, I'll be in town for a couple of hours.

"Here, use this." She reaches into her desk drawer again and pulls out a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. In addition to eschewing technology, she doesn't believe in credit cards. "Identity theft is so prevalent these days. And so easy. I will not stand for someone stealing mine," she once told me.

She looks up at me, her scarlet lips pursed against her hermit-white skin, and adjusts the knot of one of the Hermès silk scarves she always wears tied around her head like a kerchief. I've never seen her hair and have wondered if she's bald. Suffers from alopecia. The back flap of all her book covers features a much younger photo of her where she had a full head of thick, lustrous flaming red hair. Beautifully coiffed, complemented by a megawatt smile with glistening white teeth. In the two years I've worked for her, I've never seen her smile. Smirk, yes, but smile, no. Sometimes, I've wondered if she had some traumatic experience in her life that's made her such a bitter person and caused her to lose all her hair. She doesn't have any eyebrows either. And who knows what lies beneath her full-length mink.

"What are you waiting for?" She claps her bony hands together twice. "Chop! Chop! Now, get on your way."

The desk drawer still open, she pulls out a slim charcoal black cigarette from an open pack. A nauseating French Gauloise. In one fluid motion, she lights it with her gold monogrammed lighter, inhales, and blows out a cloud of smoke in my face. Glowering at me.

"And I want you to pay for my replacement coffee out of your own pocket. Don't forget to bring back all the receipts."

She flicks the ashes into the crystal, seashell-shaped ashtray on her desk. Then inhales and exhales again.

Without another word, I slip the hundred-dollar bill into my pocket and hurry out of the house. As I walk past the majestic century-old evergreen that gave Barbara's house its namesake, a pine cone falls from the tree and strikes my head.

A sign.

I just know this day is only going to go from bad to worse.

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CHAPTER TWO

Maplewood, New Jersey, is a charming town. When I was growing up, it was considered a quaint, middle-class place to live with the median age of the approximately 25,000-person population nearing seventy. But as the elderly residents began to die off, a new, younger, hipper group of Gen X'ers, many who worked in finance, the arts, entertainment, and media, began to move in, with their young kids, migrating from Manhattan, finding it an ideal place to raise a family. The schools were great, the fixer-upper houses offered space and room for expansion, the town was diverse and LGBTQ-friendly, there was a direct train that took only thirty minutes to get into the city, and it boasted a charming downtown area, known as Maplewood Village, with a wide array of eateries, retail stores, and wellness centers. There's even a dispensary above which I live in a small one-bedroom apartment with my black and white rescue cat, Moo. My cat's very chill. I think he's stoned all the time. Or just so grateful he has a home to live in and is fed. I found him three years ago, just a tiny kitten, almost starved to death outside my building. Now, I think he needs to go on the keto diet. That or Ozempic.

The walk from Barbara's house, located off posh Wyoming Avenue, is about twenty minutes. Usually, I don't mind and actually enjoy it, but it's brutally cold outside. With the windchill factor it feels like the temperature is registering below zero. The air is damp and a blizzard is expected with up to twenty inches of snow predicted. It's

going to be a white Christmas. I, however, won't be enjoying it because The Barbarian refuses to give me the day off. She makes Scrooge seem like Santa.

Though dressed for the frigid weather, I need to hug myself to stay warm. Beneath my sadly stained gloves and knockoff Uggs, my fingers and toes are stinging. I can barely feel them. My breaths come out like puffs of smoke.

The residents of Maplewood take Christmas very seriously. They go all out. The charming Victorian houses I pass as I head down toward The Village are decorated with colorful lights, and many boast festive displays on their front lawns, from Santa in his sleigh with his herd of reindeer, to elaborate creches with the Madonna and baby Jesus.

Maplewood Village is especially festive. For as long as I can remember, it brings *A Christmas Carol* to life and transforms into a Dickens village. There's an annual Christmas tree lighting and when I was little I used to love to go to The Village Green and visit all the miniature, decked-out Dickensian dollhouses. I think they still do that.

As I walk into town, I decide to get a coffee for myself while I wait for the other stores to open. The Village Coffee Shop is located on Maplewood Avenue, across the street from my apartment. Despite the freezing weather, there's a line to get inside. I guess everyone and their mother wants to warm up with a hot cocoa, coffee, or tea. My own mother, June, smartly moved a few years ago to a small town outside Jacksonville, Florida, with her new husband, Cliff, who used to own a haberdashery in town. I think Webster took the word "haberdashery" out of the dictionary. In case you're wondering, it's a retailer that sells menswear. Now, it's a wellness store that sells vitamins and tonics.

The line is ten-people deep. I hug myself, rub my hands together, and stamp my feet to ward off the numbing cold. I also wrap my wool scarf around my face. That helps a bit too.

To my relief, several people in front of me leave, unable to take the freezing cold wait. Fifteen almost unbearable minutes later, I at last step inside the shop. I'm instantly engulfed in the warmth and

the delicious aroma of coffee brewing and pastries baking. Holiday decorations abound and Christmas music is playing.

The line inside moves quickly. There's one person, a woman in a drab gray wool coat, in front of me. From the back, she looks old and frail. Her thinning ash brown hair, peeking out from her hand-knit hat, is streaked with gray and grazes her collar. A worn taupe leather purse is slung over her shoulder. I don't recognize her...

Until she collects her order and turns to face me. Her sad, crinkly blue-gray eyes, the color of a stormy sky, meet mine and her flat, dead expression morphs into something red and fiery. My heart skips a beat. I recognize her immediately.

Evangeline Hayes. The mother of my best friend from high school. Mackenzie. I haven't seen her in years. For over a decade. I remember our last encounter like it was yesterday. A month or so after Mackenzie's accident, she ran into me and my mom at The Village Market. I'll never forget her expression. Her face fell; her complexion turned chalk white and tears exploded. So distraught, she abandoned her shopping cart and ran out of the store. My mom still had me, but she no longer had a daughter.

My father never approved of my friendship with Mackenzie. He thought she was using me and didn't trust her. It's true I helped her with her homework and exams and even wrote essays for her, but the perks were worth it. The most popular girl in class, she made me feel chosen. Special. Her butt girl with benefits, I got to hang out with her and do things with her wealthy family, who adopted her when she was a baby. Go to their beach house on the Jersey Shore, go into the city to see Broadway shows and then dine at five-star restaurants as well as go to some of the parties she was invited to where she let me borrow her designer clothes (though most of them didn't fit short, stocky me). My mother was thrilled nerd girl me had a friend like her and hoped she'd introduce me to a cute, rich boy. And then Mackenzie met my other best friend and the rest is ancient history I'd like to forget. My father died a few months before the accident, unable to point his finger at me and say, "I told you so."

Mrs. Hayes looks so different now. The once stunning, boisterous woman, with lustrous natural blond hair and a super-model figure, the envy of every PTA mom, is a shell of what she once was. I think

she's shrunk a couple of inches; her shoulders are hunched, and she looks wan and gaunt. Like she's aged a hundred years.

Trembling, only one word spills from her mouth.

"*You!*" Her mouth remains frozen in shock and then fills with vitriol. She utters one more word: "Murderer!"

Her coffee cup drops from her hand and the contents splatter all over my fake camel-colored Uggs. So now I have matching coffee-stained gloves and boots. Ruined forever.

She flees the shop as "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" plays on the sound system.

The words of the song resonate in my head.

Have I been naughty or nice this year?

I think nice, but the past can't be changed. I did what I had to do. Her daughter was a user and abuser. I don't mean in the druggie sense. She took advantage of me and hurt me. She deserved to die. My father was right.

I will also confess that I thought about killing Barbara a few times this year. If you worked for her, you probably would too. Maybe I deserve my pathetic life.

Karma.

Another familiar voice halts my ruminations.

I blink twice. Then gasp.

CHAPTER THREE

A collage of childhood memories flashes in my head. The two of us chasing each other around The Village Green. Absconding to the reservoir to birdwatch. Sharing a double scoop ice cream cone on a hot summer day. Sitting on my stoop reading *Harry Potter* books. Going to the eighth-grade prom together... neither of us knowing how to dance. Then sneaking out and lying side by side on the football field pointing out the constellations in the starry sky above.

Two soulmates. Counting stars and outlining formations.

Something changed that night. We held hands. And I had the burning desire to be kissed by him. My adolescent hormones raging, we never kissed, but we were inseparable from that night on. Except for the time I spent with my bestie Mackenzie whom I confided in. She told me I could do better than someone from the wrong side of town. "It's just as easy to love someone rich," she said. Easy for her to say with every boy in high school fawning all over her.

Stars fill my eyes as I stare at him. Butterflies flit in my stomach. He breaks into my trance.

"Sloan?"

"Logan?"

Behind the counter is Logan Peterson. The boy I always loved. I haven't seen him since we graduated high school. I won a prestigious scholarship, got a B.A. from Hampshire College, and then went on to grad school. Logan, after graduating high school,

joined the Peace Corps, and we lost touch. Mail service and the Internet don't exist in the jungles of Africa.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, wondering if he saw the encounter between Mrs. Hayes and me. He was around that fateful day. And is, in fact, one of the reasons it happened. Though it wasn't his fault, things between us were never the same. It caused a rift.

Pushing that memory away, I study him. He's gone from geeky tall and skinny to lean and athletic. His thick ginger-colored hair is longer and he's started to grow a beard that deflects his freckles. His gold-flecked sage eyes sparkle against the stubble.

My heart fluttery, we do a quick catch-up while another barista helps the annoyed customers behind me. I learn that after his one-year stint in the Peace Corps, he got a full ride to Montclair State and then got into Seton Hall Law School. The university's law school is located in nearby Newark. Not the nicest place in the world with its homeless population and high crime rate.

"I've been working odd jobs to help pay for the tuition. I'm lucky there was an opening here to be a barista."

"What year are you in?"

"This is my last year." A flash of darkness moves across his face. "I got into Yale, but couldn't afford it... neither the tuition nor the room and board."

"Where are you living?" I ask. It's weird I haven't seen him around.

"With my aunt in Bloomfield."

So, he does have family. I never knew that. I don't pursue it as he goes on.

"I help her out around the house and in exchange she gives me free room and board." He pauses. "It's far from ideal, but it is what it is."

My heart hurts for him. Logan was always the smartest kid in school, but was financially challenged. His parents were dirt poor and then they perished at the end of senior year. In a terrible car accident. I guess that's why he joined the Peace Corps. He needed an escape. I never understood with his grades, perfect SATS, and background why he didn't get into a top school with financial aid. Let

alone a full scholarship. Maybe there's something I don't know about him that kept him out.

"What kind of law are you studying?" I ask, trying hard to prolong the conversation.

"IP."

My thick, wiggly brows arch, almost forming question marks.

"Intellectual property law," he expounds.

"Cool." I have no idea what that entails. There was a legal course offered in my grad school program, but I elected not to take it. Maybe I should have.

"What about you?" he asks, bringing me back to the moment. "What have you been up to?"

I catch him up on the past ten years. The *CliffsNotes* version. "So now, I'm working for Barbara Van Wyck as her PA. Her personal assistant."

He flinches, his eyes flickering with surprise and a hint of contempt. "*Her?*"

Her reputation precedes her. She's known to everyone. When we were growing up, there were rumors that Evergreen was haunted and she was hiding bodies in the attic, and/or was a wicked witch (which she is, though not a real one) who boiled little children in her cauldron. It was not uncommon for kids to tag the stone wall that protected the house like a fortress. With depictions of her in a pointy black hat and/or flying on a broom, along with bloody-red pronouncements. Today's suburban kids have better things to tag and are more interested in hashtags on social media than graffiti.

A more than gentle tap on my shoulder startles me and stops me from chatting with my old friend. I look over my shoulder and an angry-looking forty-something woman with her chubby grade-schooler son meets my gaze. The kid looks like a bully.

"Excuse me, miss," harrumphs his Botoxed, beady-eyed mother. "But if you haven't noticed, you're holding up the line." The obnoxious, runny-nosed kid sticks his tongue out at me.

The other barista has gone on a break. The line is again ten-people deep.

Tempted to stick my tongue out at the brat and to tell his mother to take a chill pill, I ignore them and place my order with Logan. A

vanilla latte for me. I'll come back later for Barbara's espressos so they won't get cold while I'm running around town getting all the stuff she wants.

I pay for it using Barbara's crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. Screw it. Let her sue me.

Logan bags the coffee. "Hey, Sloan, we should get together."

We quickly exchange phone numbers.

Maplewood's single twenty-something population has just doubled. Going from one to two.

I feel a tingle of excitement.

Am I ready to put the past behind me?

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CHAPTER FOUR

I have a dozen stores to make stops at, but none of them open until ten. There is, however, one that's open. My favorite. The Village Bookstore. It's located across from The Village Coffee Shop, just a few doors down from the building I live in. I can hang out there and read while I wait for the others to open.

I love this store. It opened when I was a sophomore in high school. It's always been my happy place. In this Amazon-dominated, e-book world, where brick-and-mortar bookstores are closing their doors and falling like cards, I'm so glad it's survived. In fact, it's flourishing and has expanded, taking over the hardware store next door. Maplewood's artsy population has been a great supporter. And I'm grateful for that.

Under the colorful namesake awning, the front windows are filled with current bestsellers as well as several of Barbara's books. The owner, a handsome, thirty-something Frenchman named Marc, whom I've always had a bit of a crush on, takes great pride in his popular, well-stocked store. Much to his consternation, Barbara's never done a book signing there. She's refused to. "Book signings are nothing but money grabs and a total waste of my writing time," she once caustically told me.

Toting the small paper bag with my latte, I head inside, happy to again be out of the cold. I look around and don't see Marc anywhere in sight. A tinge of disappointment zips through me. It's not like him to be away from the store at the busiest time of the year.

With a little time to kill, I find a book to read with my vanilla latte at one of the reading tables nestled among the floor-to-ceiling book-lined shelves. The festive store is busy at this early hour with Christmas shoppers looking for books to buy as last-minute gifts. Sipping my piping hot beverage, I become engrossed in my book—*Jane Deyre*, a contemporary retelling of one of my favorite books, *Jane Eyre*, by a new-to-me romance author, Nelle L'Amour, and decide to buy it. Not having my backpack with my wallet with me, I use the change from Barbara's hundred-dollar bill to pay for it. Ha! Barbara's Christmas gift to me. The cashier bags my purchase and as I exit the store to run Barbara's errands, Logan Peterson drifts into my head. I wonder what he's doing on Christmas Eve? Spending it with his aunt? Some friends? Maybe he has a girlfriend.

Banishing that thought, I go from store to store and pick up all the things on Barbara's list. It takes me much longer than I thought because of the long lines of holiday shoppers. Forty freezing minutes later, I'm loaded down with a heavy bag filled with a bottle of cognac, a carton of Gauloises, and all her writing supplies, including a five-pound ream of paper. I have one last thing to do. To schlep back to The Village Coffee Shop to buy her and her agent double espressos. Fingers crossed they'll stay hot on the walk back to her house. If not, she'll likely have a tantrum and throw them at me. *Great*. My new white puffer coat will have the same coffee-colored Rorschach stain as my suede gloves and fake Uggs.

I hate her.

On the bright side, it'll be another opportunity to see Logan. Beneath my coat, I feel a shiver of excitement. A tingling sensation. Maybe I'll work up the courage to invite him over to my apartment for Christmas Eve dinner. I know I have a bottle of wine and a box of frozen macaroni and cheese plus a half-eaten package of mixed greens in my fridge. If I have time at the end of the day, I can run to The Village Baker and pick up a yummy chocolate Yule log cake. A splurge. That is if he says yes. My heart pitter-patters. And second thoughts come at me. Maybe it's too soon. And it would be better if he made the first move. Or none at all.

The Village Coffee Shop is busier than before. I guess everyone wants a break from their last-minute Christmas shopping and the

frigid weather. There's once again a long line outside. Though I'm shivering, my mind warms with the thought of seeing Logan again.

Despite my reservations, I rehearse asking him over for dinner in my head.

Hey, what are you doing tonight?

Got plans for Christmas Eve?

Want to come over and hang at my place?

Fine dine on mac and cheese...

Catch up...

And then kiss under the mistletoe?

Who am I kidding? I don't have any mistletoe. And my mental ramblings are all a waste of time because when I get to the front of the line, Logan is no longer there behind the counter. He's taken his lunch break and won't be back for an hour.

My heart sinks to my stomach. The universe is telling me it's not meant to be.

Once again, it'll be a pity party for one tonight. Two if you count Moo.

Sadly, I have no real friends here. All of the kids I went to high school with have moved away. And to be honest, after Mackenzie, I'm not sure I want to become friends with anyone again. Loyalty, I've learned, is not a two-way street.

As I slump out of the shop, my head bowed down, I bump straight into a woman wearing a black mink coat that reminds me of Barbara's. It even reeks of her perfume. I look up and meet her icy cucumber-green eyes. Wearing spiky-heeled leather boots, the striking, my-age blonde is about a foot taller than me. As gorgeous as she is, she looks harried.

"Get out of my way!" She literally pushes me to the side with her monstrous orange leather bag, puckering her full blood-red lips.

"Some people," she mumbles under her breath, "are better off dead."

I feel like one of them.

CHAPTER FIVE

The trek back to Barbara's house is brutal.

The two-ton shopping bag with Barbara's supplies, my new book, and the two espressos is weighing me down, and it's all uphill.

Plus, it's colder than it was this morning. The temperature has dropped. The air is bitter cold and damp. Flurries are already dancing in the drab gray sky. While I waited in line for the coffee replacements, I heard people saying that up to three feet of snow is expected by the morning with drifts up to ten. Maybe Barbara will let me off early and tell me I don't have to work tomorrow.

Fat chance. She's on deadline and has to get her new manuscript to her agent, Margo, by January first. Seriously, who works over the holidays?

Hello... yours truly. Maybe they'll renegotiate. I could use a day off.

My teeth chatter. It's so cold my eyes sting and tears freeze on my cheeks. There are no stores I can stop into to warm up along the way. It's all residential. I fear I'm going to get frostbite. Lose a few toes and fingers. Maybe even part of my nose. For the rest of my life, I'll be a freak. I can already hear staring children whispering to their parents, "Mommy, Daddy, what happened to that lady?"

Twenty excruciating minutes later, I reach Evergreen. A fine layer of snow is already coating the unruly, overrun front yard as well as the needly boughs of the overgrown, wannabe Christmas tree.

Barbara hasn't used a gardener in ages. She thinks they're a waste of money. All stooges: Moe, Blow, and Go.

With my numb fingers, I manage to punch in the code to open the massive iron gate, barely able to feel the buttons beneath my gloves. The gate slowly slides open, making a rattling sound. One of these days the motor is going to give out and I'll be trapped in the house with The Barbarian. And starve to death. That is, if she doesn't turn me into chopped liver and eat me.

Barbara's mansion sits on a hill and I dread mounting the dozen snow-covered steps to her front door. Thank goodness, the county forced her to install a handrailing, so I grab onto it with my free hand, humping the heavy bag. I tread carefully because my vision is blurred from my tearing eyes. My body is shuddering from the cold. And I'm such a klutz.

I make it to her front door. I breathe into my scarf with a shiver of relief.

Weirdly, the front door is slightly ajar. I'm sure I closed it, but sometimes the heavy oak door doesn't close all the way, and I have to give it an extra yank. Maybe this morning, in my frazzled state, I accidentally left it open. Or her agent, Margo, did.

Hesitantly, I step inside the wide two-story-high foyer, with its dangling ten-light wrought-iron chandelier that looks like it will fall down any minute and kill someone, the steep mahogany stairs its accomplice.

The house is eerily quiet. I expect to hear Barbara pecking away at her keyboard from her office behind the staircase. *Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.* Or shrieking, "Sloan, what's taken you so long? Where the hell have you been?"

I also listen for the sound of conversation. That between The Barbarian and her equally boorish agent.

Instead, I hear nothing.

Silence. Deadly silence.

'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

Trust me, she's got plenty of mice. I've seen them. One once tried to nibble my lunch.

Unease brewing inside me, I drop the heavy bag on the hardwood floor and pad to her office with only the bag of espressos in my hand. Fingers crossed they're still hot. I should have bought her a thermos for Christmas, but that would have been way too thoughtful.

The door to her office door is wide open. She's still sitting at her desk, hunched over her typewriter. Her head bowed.

"Barbara, I'm back with the coffees and all your stuff," I call out as I step inside, still dressed in my puffer, gloves, wool cap, and faux Uggs.

No response.

Maybe she fell asleep at her desk. Ha! Resting her bitch face. Still in her mink and silk scarf, her arms are dangling by her sides. A half-smoked black cigarette is stubbed out on the floor beside her. I can still smell the sickening stench of it.

My toes defrosting, I stride up to her. Her reading glasses have fallen off the bridge of her nose and are hanging from their mother-of-pearl chain. Her eyes are shut and her jaw is slack.

I tap her on the shoulder.

"Barbara?" I say tentatively.

No response.

"Barbara," I say again more assertively, my voice louder, the tap harder. Still no response.

Something feels wrong. Very wrong.

"Barbara???"

Setting the bag with the two espressos on her desk, I slide off my gloves and shove them into my coat pockets.

I put two ice-cold fingers to her bony neck, slipping them beneath the knot of her scarf, and check her pulse. They brush against the collar of her repulsive mink. I feel nothing. Maybe it's because my digits are so numb. I rub my hands together to warm them, then do it again.

Still nothing. Not even the slightest thump.

My own pulse accelerating, I lift one of her dangling arms and put my two fingers to her limp, veiny wrist. And hold them there waiting for a sign.

In my head I count to ten.

Barbara the Barbarian is dead.

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CHAPTER SIX

I take her pulse again. Shout at her. Shake her.

Nada.

She is D-E-A-D dead.

Maybe she had a heart attack, a stroke, or an aneurysm. For a moment, I'm in some state of shock or denial. I go numb all over. Then reality hits me and my inner panic button goes off. I better call 911!

My fingers quivering, I grab my backpack (it's still on the floor where I left it), and fish for my phone when suddenly I hear a weird rattling noise. A foreboding sixth sense niggles at my brain. The hairs on the back of my neck bristle. Why do I feel like someone is watching me? My heart pounding, I spin around and my eyes circle her office. No one's there that I can see unless they're hiding behind her built-in bookshelf in a secret room that reveals itself with a magic word or the push of a hidden button. The house is old enough to have one, but I doubt it. I'm just being paranoid. That's all.

I return my attention to her desk. The pages of her perfectly stacked manuscript are mussed up. Scattered. Barbara's a neat freak. Maybe she was leafing through them when she went into cardiac arrest or whatever befell her. Or maybe this is the handiwork of Margo, her high-strung agent.

I glance at the sheet of paper that's curled in her typewriter carriage, replacing the blank one she pulled out earlier to write her

shopping list. The new one has two words centered on it in bold caps. And below it her name.

WHITE LIEX
By Barbara Van Wyck

The title page. The very last thing Barbara types upon completing her manuscript. On impulse, I yank it out of the carriage, tearing off the bottom right corner.

I still can't shake the feeling that I'm not alone. Fear pools in the pit of my stomach. Though there doesn't appear to be signs of a struggle or anything missing, can someone possibly have scared her to death? A burglar? My phone in my hand, I'm about to call for help when the screen goes black. My phone is dead! As dead as Barbara. I think about resorting to Barbara's landline when I hear more rattling, then something that sounds like a sneeze. Panic grips me. Maybe the burglar is still here and has a gun. I have to get out of here. And fast.

In my freaked-out state, I act on impulse and hastily gather the pages of Barbara's manuscript off her desk and stash them in my backpack. Then race out of her office to the front door, tripping over the bag of supplies. The bottle of cognac rolls out and I snatch it. A weapon. If someone is following me, I can smash the bottle over their head.

One thing's for sure. The Barbarian is never going to drink it.
Bestselling author Barbara Van Wyck is dead.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

I arrive at the front door of my second-floor walk-up apartment, breathless and frozen. I don't know if my lungs hurt more from the bitter cold or from my run. The whole way here I kept turning my head to see if someone was following me. I don't know why I was acting so paranoid. It's not like I killed someone or robbed a bank. All I did was steal someone's manuscript. Did I *really* steal it? No, I was protecting it from getting into the wrong hands, I tell myself as I fumble for my keys with my shaking, stinging, near-frostbitten fingers.

I at last find them and insert them into the corroded lock, turning it twice. I swing the door open and am greeted by my cat, Moo, who rubs his soft cow-patterned fur against my stiff coffee-stained boots. He utters a meow. Unsure if he's telling me he hates the smell of the coffee or is hungry, I close the door behind me, making sure to double lock it. And to secure the safety chain.

The smell of marijuana wafts in the air from the dispensary below. I place my backpack on the rust-colored corduroy couch in the living room and without taking off my outerwear, except my gloves, I head to the kitchen to feed Moo. I open a can of cat food and after I empty it into his bowl with some kibble on the counter, he jumps up. Yup, he's for sure stoned. He's got a case of the munchies and eats vigorously.

Satisfied I'm safe, I plug my phone into the charger and dial 911 to report Barbara's death and a possible burglary. I anxiously wait for

a dispatcher to come on the line, but keep getting told to hold until the next one is available. With the blizzard, 911 operators must be swamped with emergencies. Which is just as well because every speech I've rehearsed sounds all wrong.

Oh, hi! I'd like to report a dead body...

After a half hour I give up. I desperately search my brain. Who else can I call? I don't know anyone nearby except my octogenarian landlord, Mrs. Cruikshank, but what could she do? It's not like she could get through to 911 any more than I could. Maybe Barbara's housekeeper, Priscilla, who comes on weekdays, discovered her body and called it in. Or even her agent, Margo. I can only hope.

Taking a deep breath, I make myself some chamomile tea in the microwave to warm up and return to the living room with my half-charged phone and mug. I set them on the coffee table and plonk down on the couch. It's the couch I grew up with. My mother gave it to me—along with the rest of our drab brown furniture—when she and her new husband, Cliff, moved to Florida. The two lovebirds wanted a fresh start and “a more beachy décor” even though they live two hours from the ocean.

Sometimes I think I was adopted. I'm nothing like my middle-class parents. With my reddish-brown hair and smattering of freckles, I don't look like either of them, and I certainly didn't inherit my penchant for writing from them. My late dad, Clark, was a by-the-books kind of man. Maybe that's why he became a bookkeeper. A keeper of numbers, not words. He was strict and righteous. “Honesty is the best policy,” he preached to me. Once I tried to steal a tiny seashell and he caught me. I'd never seen him so furious, and he threatened that if I ever stole again, he would ground me for life. A few months later he died of an aneurysm. If you ask me, he had too many numbers in his head.

Following his death, my dutiful mom, who never wrote anything more than a grocery list (I even wrote my own school absentee notes and had her sign them), came out of her shell. She inherited his small life insurance policy and took up with Cliff Barker, the owner of The Village Haberdashery, where she worked part time. If you ask me, there had always been some hanky-panky going on between

them behind the door to the men's dressing room. If my father only knew...

After a few sips of my hot tea, I reach into my backpack and pull out Barbara's manuscript. It takes me no time to organize the pages. I curl my legs under me and start to read it.

Three hours later (I'm a speed reader), I've read the entire thing from start to finish. I've laughed, I've cried, I've held my breath. And gasped at the most jaw-dropping ending I've ever read. It's Barbara's best book ever.

Thoughts tumble over one another in my head like a wrestling match. What should I do with Barbara's manuscript? Send it to her agent and/or publisher? Send it back to her (as if she's going to be checking her mail anytime soon)? Send it to her next of kin? (I'm not sure if she has any.)

There's only one thing that makes sense. And not a stitch of guilt threads through me. The Barbarian owes me for all I put up with. I need only to glance down at my stained boots and gloves to be reminded. I have no choice...

White Lies is now mine to do with it what I want.

So what if my headstrong, righteous father must be rolling in his grave? He's dead.

Deader than Barbara.

Neither can do a thing.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

It's now going on 5 p.m. The sky has darkened. Moving to my window, I see that it's snowing heavily outside.

I forego dinner. I have work to do.

Taking my ancient MacBook (I've had it since college) out of my backpack, I scan the manuscript into it. Given that it's 420 pages and my computer is slow, it takes over an hour. I download the PDF file onto my desktop and convert it into a Word doc.

While it's brilliant, it needs work. There are a couple of continuity issues and tons of typos. In addition to lots of missing periods, commas, and quotation marks, the "S" key on Barbara's ancient typewriter doesn't work. She's asked me over and over to find someone who can repair it, but I've never been able to find anyone. All those twenty-something Geek Squad dudes have no clue. One once asked me, "What's a Selectric?"

So, she's been forced to substitute an "X" for an "S". It's amazing how many times the letter "S" is used. But I've always been able to figure out the words and fix them, before emailing her manuscript to her agent or publisher, mostly through the Microsoft Word spell-check and "replace all" feature. These for thexe... She for xhe... Is for ix... Says for xayx. But I have to be careful not to replace all the words that have an "x" in them. For example, the number "six" and even the word "example." Sex is a particularly tricky word. This takes me another hour.

Then, I decide to change all the characters' names. Eleanor, the mother, and Morgan, the child, are now Helen and Taylor. Next, I go through the book and look for things I can tighten and/or revise. I also change the narrative from past tense to present tense. It's a more laborious process than I thought and takes me several more hours.

It's now going on ten o'clock. Almost done with my revisions, there's a loud knock at my door. My heart jumps. Is it my imagined stalker or maybe the police? I leap up from the couch and hide both Barbara's typewritten manuscript and my laptop under one of the cushions.

Anxiously, I peer through the peephole of my front door. I breathe a sigh of relief. It's Mrs. Cruikshank, the eighty-nine-year-old woman who owns the building and occupies the three-bedroom apartment next to mine. I open the door.

"Merry Christmas," she says, holding up a bag of store-bought sparkly green and red cookies. I saw them on sale today for ninety-nine cents at The Village Market. They were giving them away like ice in the winter.

"Merry Christmas," I say back, wishing her Xmas gift to me was a month of free rent.

For a split second, I think about giving her Barbara's expensive cognac, but quickly change my mind. It's too good a gift for the rapacious woman and I may need it to decompress.

"Don't forget the rent is due on January first," she says, making me pleased with my decision. "And just a friendly reminder, you're one month behind."

Her tone is hardly friendly. I'd call it threatening.

She leaves. I slam the door closed. And lock it.

She's all the more reason to make Barbara's book mine.

I need to move out of this dump.

And get on with my life. Or I'm going to end up being one of those old cat ladies whose mice-ridden apartment smells like cat pee and tuna.

I return to the couch and remove the manuscript and my laptop from under the cushion and transport them to my bedroom where I set them both down on my small wooden desk. It's the desk I had

growing up. The one I sat at to do all my homework, write my short stories, and fill out my college applications. And composed the essay that changed my life. It holds a lot of memories, but it's barely big enough to hold Barbara's manuscript, my laptop, and the bag of cookies.

Lowering myself onto the matching wooden chair, I flip my laptop open and read the manuscript, looking for any typos the spell-check program has missed. I'm so into reading it that I startle when my phone rings. My breath hitches. Could it possibly be Logan? I actually haven't thought about him since I fled Barbara's house with her manuscript. But at this moment, he's all I can think about.

I run back to the living room and grab my phone. My heart sinks when I see the caller ID. It's my mother calling from Florida. She always picks the worst times to call me. I think about not answering, but she'll call again and again until she gets hold of me. So, I hit the accept button before it goes to voicemail and slump onto the couch.

"Hi, Mom," I say in a voice that could win the most lackluster voice of the year award if there is such a thing.

"Hi, honey," she says cheerfully. "I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas."

"Thanks. Merry Christmas to you too."

"Did you get the gifts Cliff and I sent you?"

"Yeah, they came on Monday."

"I hope you like them."

"I love them. Thanks." Truth, I hate them. She always sends me the same thing—a weird-smelling candle I can never use because Moo will knock it over and set the apartment on fire. (That almost happened once!) And an ugly Christmas sweater I'll never wear. This year's red and green cardigan with its 3D reindeer horns could be a contender for the ugliest Christmas sweater ever.

I feel bad I haven't had the time to send them something. "Yours should be coming early next week," I say. With no job, I'll have plenty of time to shop for them. And everything will be fifty percent off after Christmas.

"Are you doing anything special tonight?" she asks, code for *do you have a hot date?*

I pause before responding. “No, just going to sleep early. I’ve had a stressful week at work.” That’s a massive understatement.

“Well, I hope that horrible boss of yours is giving you the day off tomorrow.”

My mother has never been supportive of my writing career or working for Barbara at minimum wage. She’s always thought I should have gotten a teaching degree as backup or have majored in accounting or something techy—i.e. something practical and lucrative that offered benefits and a pension.

“Yes,” I tell her. “She’s giving me the day off.”

And the day after and the day after for the rest of my life. I decide not to tell her that I no longer have a job. That Barbara’s dead. Instead, I tell her I have something important to do and wish both her and Cliff a Merry Christmas again. My mom could stay on the phone for the rest of the night if I didn’t cut her off with a “love-you-bye” and a jab of the red end call button. I turn my phone setting to “Do Not Disturb” so all my calls will go to voicemail, and I won’t hear her call me again.

I wasn’t lying when I said I had something important to do.

I make two final little changes to the title page.

I delete *White Lies* (formerly *Liex*) by Barbara Van Wyck and type in *Black Lies* by S.L. Whitman, the pen name I’ve always wanted to use. It sounds smart and literary and is an homage to my favorite poet, Walt Whitman. I loved *Leaves of Grass*.

I stare at the title page until my eyeballs throb.

I haven’t lost my job. I just have a new one. I’m at last a bona fide author.

The wind howls outside and a sudden wave of panic hits me.

I need to get rid of Barbara’s typewritten manuscript!

CHAPTER NINE

I pace my shoe-box-sized apartment. Moo trails me. My heart's racing.

What should I do?

If I had a fireplace, I'd burn Barbara's manuscript to ashes. But I don't have a fireplace. I don't even have matches.

Nor do I have a shredder.

And I've got to stop calling it Barbara's manuscript. It's mine now. Finders keepers, losers weepers, right?

Without overthinking it, I peel off the top page of the typewritten manuscript with the title *White Liex* by Barbara Van Wyck and tear it into a million tiny pieces, then flush them down the toilet.

The next page stares me in the face. A dedication to someone whose name starts with the letter "M."

For M. I'll never forget what you did.

Barbara's never dedicated a book to anyone. Is she referring to her agent Margo?

Without overthinking it, I tear up that page, too, and likewise flush it down the toilet.

As I watch the bits and pieces swirl in the bowl like confetti, I think about ripping up every page, but it will take hours and likely clog up the toilet which overflows frequently. It's probably as old as

Mrs. Cruikshank. And getting a plumber on Christmas Day to fix it will be next to impossible.

My mind zeroes in on one thought: I've got to get the manuscript out of my apartment and as far away from here as possible. A frightening thought assaults me...

Is stealing someone's book a crime?

What if the next knock on my door is the police? And they arrest me? And I spend Christmas Eve in jail?

My mind in a frenzy, I hurry back to the living room and look outside the window. It's blizzarding. The quarter-size white flakes dance madly in the gusting wind. There's already three inches of snow on the ground. Not a single car is on the road. I could throw the manuscript out in one of the garbage cans behind the building, but the trash people won't be here until the end of the week. It's too risky. And what if nosybody Mrs. Cruikshank discovers it? She loves snooping through the trash.

It's too bad I don't have a car. I could have disposed of it in some town miles from here. But chances are, with my luck, I'd skid off the icy road, hit a tree, and die.

There's also the train that goes into the city, but it's for sure not running on Christmas Eve in this weather at this hour. Even if it were, it would likely derail with me the only casualty.

Watching the snow fall is mesmerizing, but I need to focus. *Think, Sloan. Think.* I blink several times and I remember something. On the way back from Barbara's house I passed a humongous dumpster. About ten long blocks from here. It's being used by some construction workers who are renovating an old house. Filled with broken glass, nail-ridden boards, a dirty old toilet, and rusty appliances among other things, no one in their right mind would climb inside it, even if they could. Especially on Christmas Eve in this life-threatening snowstorm. And with over twenty inches of snow expected overnight, by tomorrow morning the manuscript will be buried at least one foot under.

Decision made. This is where Barbara's manuscript will have its final resting place.

RIP, *White Lies*.

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CHAPTER TEN

It's beyond freezing. The temperature is definitely below zero and probably minus thirty with the windchill factor. I'm wearing an extra pair of socks beneath my boots, tights under my jeans, two wool scarves (one around my face, the other around my neck), and multiple layers under my puffer coat—including my mother's ugly Christmas sweater because it's the warmest one I have.

I'm moving like a snail. The wind is fierce and is threatening to blow me away. Because of the whiteout, I can barely see two feet in front of me, and it's slippery. Plus, I keep stopping to see if there's anyone following me or watching me. I can't ward off the chill I feel that has nothing to do with the weather and everything to do with my gnawing paranoia.

Why do I keep thinking someone is following me?

And why can't I stop thinking about Barbara? Dead as a doornail Barbara. Notice how I don't say "poor Barbara" because honestly, I don't feel sorry for her. The Barbarian deserved to die. She treated me like a doormat. Stepped all over me. Made me feel vilified and used. Maybe it's meant to be.

There's a reason I chose to work for her. A reason she died. A reason her manuscript became mine.

Kismet.

My luck is about to change.

Tomorrow is another day... that is, if something bad doesn't happen to me. Like a two-ton tree toppling over. Slipping and

breaking my neck, then freezing to death. And what if someone attacks me? I grip the straps of my backpack. As if someone's going to jump out from behind a snow-covered bush and ambush me.

They don't. Only a frightened squirrel scuttles in front of me, lit by the dim light of a century-old lamppost. At least I've got my phone in my pocket if anything happens, though reaching 911 seems highly unlikely.

As I trudge ahead, the words of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" pop into my head. At the rate I'm moving, I feel like I have miles to go before I sleep.

How far is Alaska?

Finally, twenty freezing minutes later, I reach the dumpster. I'm only five-foot-three and it seems way taller than I recall.

Anxiously, I take in my surroundings, my eyes darting in every direction. The coast is clear, an expression I haven't used since *that* life-changing day. My gloved hands shaking, be it from the cold or nerves or a combination of both—or the memory of that day—I shrug off my backpack and pull out the manuscript. I should have put a rubber band around it to keep the pages together or tied it up with a piece of the string Moo loves to play with.

Stupid me needs to figure out the best way to get the entire manuscript into the dumpster. In one shot. Because of my height, it's going to be hard. Can I jump up in the slippery snow and slam-dunk it? Certainly, attempting a long shot in the gusting, blinding wind won't work. Basketball has never been my sport. I actually don't have a sport unless you count shuffleboard. Clumsy me has never been an athlete.

My mind working overtime, I contemplate my options when something slams into my back and I find myself slipping, sliding, flailing, and gasping. Losing my balance, I let go of the manuscript and the pages go flying. Swirling in the frigid air like a whirling dervish.

Oh God, no! This can't be happening! The manuscript is gone!

In a desperate attempt to break my fall, I slam my hand against the metal dumpster, hit my head, and then fall hard onto the snow-covered ground. Landing in a tangled heap.

Searing hot pain shoots up my right arm. The stars behind my eyes mingle with the snowflakes. I blink my tearing eyes several times.

Barbara is standing frozen before me in her long mink coat. I must be hallucinating. Seeing things. Her emerald green eyes narrow at me, like slivers of glass, while her blood-red lips press thin in a hard, angry line. *I know what you did.* The wind carries her voice away; it reverberates in my ears.

I know what you did.

Icy fear shoots through me. Followed by a flash of white light. Then everything goes black.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'm back inside my apartment.

Don't ask me how I made it back home.

After I came to (I don't think I was unconscious for too long), I got my bearings and forced myself to battle the elements. The frigid temperature. The gusting wind. The blinding snow.

And all the pain. From the sting in my fingers and toes to my Texas-size headache to the agonizing throb in my right arm. It extends from my fingers all the way up to my shoulder, and I can barely move it. I shivered every excruciating step of the way back and honestly thought freezing to death like Hans Christian Andersen's little match girl might be a welcome relief.

Getting into my apartment was a nightmare. Unable to move my right hand, I had to use my left one to dig through my backpack for my keys and unlock both the building door and my apartment door. It was virtually next to impossible as the old, corroded locks don't open easily. And klutzy me is far from ambidextrous. I almost buzzed my landlord, Mrs. Cruikshank, to let me in, but given my sorry state I didn't want anything to do with the snippy busybody. Or have to explain things.

So, now, after almost passing out from the climb up the steep, rickety flight of stairs to my apartment, I'm safe and sound. Without taking off any of my outerwear, I flop down on my couch. My cat Moo rubs his fur against my snowy boots. I unthaw and want to process what just happened. But first I need to decompress.

I need a drink. Not tea or coffee. Something alcoholic. Something strong.

The bottle of wine in the fridge flashes into my mind. But how the hell will I be able to uncork it with my bum hand. It's hard enough in the first place because the wine I buy is cheap and tends to have bad corks that get stuck, break in half, or sink into the bottle. And I have one of those cheap, fall-apart corkscrews that's so hard to maneuver.

Then suddenly, I remember the bottle of cognac I stole from Barbara. (Thank God, I've still got brain membranes and am still thinking.) I left it on the kitchen counter before going out on my excursion.

With Moo trailing me, I make it to the kitchen. To my dismay, the expensive bottle has a cork, but I think I can twist it off with my left hand. Using my teeth, I pull off the glove, finger by finger. So what if my prized shearling glove now has bite marks; it was already ruined by Barbara's coffee. Then, I unsnap my quilted coat and hold the bottle between my legs. Uncorking it is a struggle. Cursing under my breath, I swear I'll hurl the bottle and lick the liquor off the floor if I have to. That's how desperate I am.

Finally, with a buoyant pop, the cork gives.

I don't have any proper glasses for cognac. Tumblers. Or are they called shot glasses? Using my left hand, I take a glug straight from the bottle. I've never had cognac before, but I could get used to it. The amber liquid burns my throat, but once past my larynx, it enters my system and warms me. I take another glug and bring the bottle to the living room. Moo again follows me.

Holding the cognac bottle in my left hand, I plop back down on the couch. Moo curls up beside me and purrs. I take glug after glug. The cognac, like a drug, alleviates my pain. Maybe that's why many mothers use it to soothe their teething infants' gums. I start to decompress and process what happened tonight.

So, I went out to toss Barbara's typewritten manuscript in a nearby dumpster. I had the feeling I was being followed, but every time I hazarded a look over my shoulder, no one was there. I got to the dumpster in one piece, and while I strategized how to get all the

pages inside it in one go, I swear I felt someone push me. I fell and all the pages went flying.

A mugger? In Maplewood? The weirdest thing is that I didn't see or hear anyone and my backpack was intact. Wouldn't a mugger have taken it? Or at least my wallet with my driver's license, one credit card, and the money left over from Barbara's one-hundred-dollar bill?

Maybe it was just a gust of the fierce wind. Or my imagination. I don't know. When I lost consciousness, I thought I saw Barbara. And heard a voice.

I know what you did.

A shiver skitters down my spine. Is that possible? I thought for sure she was dead when I fled her house. I took her pulse four times. But I didn't put my hand to her heart or check if she was breathing. I couldn't bear to unbutton her repulsive fur and slide my hand underneath it.

Could she still be alive? Impulsively, I take out my phone from my backpack with my good hand and call her number. Her office phone rings a dozen times. No answer. But that still doesn't prove Barbara's dead. She seems like she's the kind of person who would go to sleep in her mink wearing earplugs. There's one other way to find out—go over to her house. But there's no way I'm going out again in this blizzard.

I take another glug of the cognac. The bottle is halfway depleted.

Maybe I was wrong. Am I losing my mind? Or am I as drunk as a sailor?

I chug the rest of the cognac like soda pop.

My eyelids grow heavy.

And for the second time tonight, I lose consciousness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

An angry meow awakens me. My heavy eyelids flutter open. The bright sunshine streaming through my living room window pains my pupils. I squint. I wince.

It takes a few moments to get my bearings. Come to my senses.

I'm home. I conked out on the couch with my clothes on. My puffer coat, snow boots, and all the rest. I don't know what hurts more. My arm or my throbbing head—be it from my fall or consuming a bottle of cognac or both.

Moo is on my chest, nudging me to feed him. Bracing myself with my good hand, I push myself up to a sitting position. My back is killing me, too, from falling asleep on the lumpy couch. Moo jumps off me and meows. *Feed me*, he says with his imploring green eyes.

Unable to ignore the excruciating pain, I gingerly remove my right-hand glove. God, it hurts! Tossing it onto the coffee table, I, for the first time, examine my injured wrist.

Yikes. It's worse than I thought. My wrist has ballooned to twice its size and is an awful shade of purple. And my fingers look like sausages, color and all. Maybe they're frostbitten, but I rule out that possibility since the fingers of my left hand look and feel normal. The good news is I can wiggle them a little and nothing looks misshapen. My hunch is I have a bad sprain and haven't broken a bone.

I manage to feed Moo some Friskies and a bowl of milk. He looks expectantly at the can of tuna on the counter, but I can't open it. I take off my hat and coat—getting my arm out of the right sleeve

hurts like hell—and lay them on the small Formica table, then pad to the bathroom to relieve myself and administer some first aid.

I use my left hand to flush the toilet, turn on the faucet, and hold my toothbrush. After cupping a handful of water to my parched mouth, I find a scrap of Barbara's title page that didn't make it into the toilet and dispose of it. As I do, I glimpse myself in the bathroom mirror and gasp. I look ghastly. My complexion's blotchy and my auburn hair is matted to my scalp. I put my left hand to my skull and feel a bump. But no crusted blood. I don't think I've concussed.

Beneath the sink is a cabinet where I keep all my first aid supplies. It's almost a pharmacy because I'm so accident prone. All sorts of bandages, ointments, and painkillers line the shelves.

RICE. Rest. Ice. Compression. Elevation. That's how you treat a sprain. I know that from once having sprained my ankle after missing a step of the uneven stairs to my apartment. You'd think Mrs. Cruikshank would have fixed them, but the cheapskate didn't. And even worse, meaner, cheaper, Barbara the Barbarian made me run all her errands even though I was hobbling and in obvious pain. In retrospect, I should have been on crutches. And whacked her with one.

Truthfully, I'm glad she's dead. I'd be lying to you if I said I wasn't. I wonder if someone found her body. After I tend to my wrist, I'll check the Neighborhood Watch app on my phone. If someone did, it'll surely be posted. People who use this app tend to be gossips.

I find my Ace bandage and wrap it around my wrist, securing it with the metal fastener. I desperately want to down two Advil, to ameliorate both the intense pain and my hangover, but I can't open the childproof cap. I feel so pathetic.

I should rest and ice my wrist, keeping it elevated (one of Barbara's Hermès scarves would have made an attractive sling), but I have much better things to do. Instead, I pad to my living room window and look outside. I smile despite the pain still shooting up my arm. It's indeed a glistening white Christmas.

A beautiful snowy Christmas morning that looks like an Andrew Wyeth painting. Or a scene out of a Dickens novel.

With the click of a finger, I open my one and only gift.

The one that's sitting on the desktop of my decrepit MacBook.

Barbara's manuscript.
Whoops! I mean mine.
Merry Christmas to me.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It's indeed a beautiful day to go for a walk in the snow. The sun is shining brightly and everything is white and glistening. From my window, I can see bundled-up kids playing in the white powder. Sledding down the street, throwing snowballs, and making snowmen. I remember doing those things when I was their age although I much preferred reading a book indoors.

But there's no way I'm going out today. Not in my condition. With my luck, I'll fall and break a leg. Or some kid will throw a snowball at me and blind me in one eye. I bet that obnoxious kid I saw in The Village Coffee Shop is lurking in an alleyway, just waiting to ambush me.

Plus, I have work to do and can't let my throbbing wrist get in the way. *My* manuscript can't sit on my laptop forever. I need to get it into the world. Come up with a plan.

I traipse to the kitchen. Using my left hand, I manage to make some coffee and toast an English muffin. One at a time, I bring them to the living room and set them down on the coffee table. I take several sips of the hot coffee and my mind drifts to the typewritten manuscript I attempted to toss last night. Where did all the pages go? Has anyone found them? With more than a foot of snow on the ground, they must be buried all over the place. Maybe some are hidden in snow-covered bushes or dangling from tree branches. Fingers crossed that when the snow begins to melt, they'll be illegible. All the words blurred or washed away, sitting somewhere in

a pile of slush, the sheets of paper a soggy mess. And no one will know who wrote them because I destroyed the title page with Barbara's name on it.

Talking about The Barbarian, she hasn't called me. And believe me, the recluse is not outside shoveling snow. It's going on 9:30, which means I'm a half hour late for work. Well, my former work. Which makes me think she must be dead. Really dead. By now, someone must have found her body. Using my left index finger, I type into my phone search bar:

Author Barbara Van Wyck Found Dead.

Tons of articles about her come up, but none reporting her death. I also check the Neighborhood Watch app for reports of any local burglaries or murders. There are none. Not surprising as Maplewood is not a crime-ridden city. There's only been one murder in the last five years. A rather grisly one involving a jilted nanny and her lover. Ironically, it inspired one of Barbara's bestsellers.

I think about how I found Barbara—sitting at her desk, dressed in her ratty fur, hunched over her typewriter. By now, if she's dead, rigor mortis has set in. I wonder if she's fallen out of her chair? Or her head's snapped off? For a split second, I think about calling 911 again but quickly banish that thought. It'll open a can of worms. The police will want to know why I didn't call yesterday. And what I was doing at her house in the first place. Though I can explain I worked there as her assistant, it doesn't necessarily make me innocent. The last thing I need is to open a police investigation. I need that about as much as another hole in the head. What if they discover I stole her manuscript? I'm still not certain if that's considered a crime. Maybe pilfered is a better word than stole. I mean, what value does an unpublished manuscript have? It's just a bunch of worthless pages of paper. Though the ream did cost seventeen dollars and ninety-five cents, so maybe that counts for something.

The question is: why am I acting like I committed a crime?

Sloan, stop this nonsense, I silently chide.

I blow out a breath. I need to get to work. I'm an author now—except I won't *officially* be one if I don't publish my book. *Publish or*

perish, my professors preached.

A lot of young authors are into self-publishing. I've honestly never entertained that idea. If you ask me, it's a last-ditch resort for authors who have sought representation and a deal with a traditional publisher—preferably, one of the Big Five—but haven't succeeded. While many self-published authors have become bestsellers, it's not the route for me. Plus, it seems like so much work—designing your own cover, getting it edited and proofread, formatting the manuscript, uploading it on Amazon and all those other retailers, and figuring out a launch plan. And then you have to market and promote it twenty-four seven. And that costs a small fortune if you want to become a bestseller.

Why do all that work, spend all that money when someone else can? Barbara the Barbarian had it made. All she had to do was write. Not waste her time or spend a dime other than on basic supplies. And those were tax deductible.

In grad school, they also taught us a little bit about the business of publishing. To get a literary agent to represent you, you need to *query* them. Email them a compelling letter that will get them interested in reading your attached Word doc manuscript. A letter that will excite them.

We once had to write a sample one for a book we were working on or contemplating. I got a C+ on mine, my professor calling it flat and uninspired. That's because it was hard to have passion for my work-in-progress when my headstrong professor hated it and told me to my face it was a stupid idea. Entitled *Octoplus*, it was about a young college student who interned at a zoo and befriended a talking octopus that helped her solve a mystery. What was I thinking? *Black Lies* is different. It's the real deal. And it's a masterpiece.

I finish my coffee and muffin and spend an hour researching query letters—kind of like a refresher course. Sitting at my desk with my laptop open, Moo curled up by my feet, I then go to Microsoft Word and click open a blank page. Using only my left hand (my bandaged right one is still throbbing madly and I can hardly move it), I start composing a letter. It takes like forever, not only because I'm typing so slowly, but nothing comes out the way I want it to sound. I delete and delete. Revise and revise. It's as hard as writing a poem.

Every word counts. Finally, a little after two p.m., I have something I like.

Dear (INSERT AGENT'S NAME):

My 80,000-word novel, Black Lies, is a dark psychological suspense. I would describe it as a cross between two prize-winning bestsellers—Emma Donoghue's Room and Frieda MacFadden's The Housemaid. It possesses the literary quality of the former and the fast-paced pzazz of the latter.

The tagline: What if you had to spend your childhood locked behind a secret room by your ruthless mother? Tortured and hidden from the world until you were set free?

The manuscript is attached.

A bit about me. I am a recent Hampshire College graduate with honors in English and hold an M.A. in creative writing from Iowa Writers Workshop. I have several prestigious literary prizes to my name, including the Marian H. Smith Short Story Prize, and have been published in Poets & Writers Magazine.

This is my first novel. Thank you for your consideration. I hope you share my excitement and look forward to hearing back from you.

It would be an honor to be represented by you and your agency.

*Sincerely,
S.L. Whitman*

I read it over, and pleased, I save it to my desktop—QueryLetter.docx. I'm glad I made no reference to The Barbarian or any of her books. This week I will copy and paste the letter and email it to a gazillion agents with my manuscript attached.

Then, I do one other thing: I set up a new Google account: slwhitmanauthor@gmail.com. I can't wait to start sending out the letter and my manuscript. Tomorrow, I will go to The Village Bookstore (it's closed for Christmas Day) and read the acknowledgments of every bestseller who's written a thriller similar to *Black Lies*, though none come to mind.

And take notes. Every author I've read acknowledges their agent in the backmatter.

The only agent I won't be sending it to is Barbara's. Margo Bancroft, the mighty head of the eponymous literary agency. Like they say, there are other fish in the sea.

About to take a break to search for some loose Advil (my wrist is killing me), a loud knock at my front door startles me.

You can't get into my building without using the intercom. And the firm, repetitive rap sounds nothing like Mrs. Cruikshank's light tap-tap.

My heart leaps to my throat.

I hastily shut down my computer and hide it underneath my mattress. Like a stolen treasure.

The rap grows louder. More persistent.

It can only mean one thing.

Barbara's body was found.

The police are at my door!

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My heart pounding, I pad to the door, with Moo following me. The ancient floorboards creak under my faux Uggs which I have yet to take off. When I do, I'm going to bury them along with my coffer-stained shearling gloves. I don't want to wear anything that reminds me of Barbara. Weirdly, the coffee incident that happened only yesterday morning feels like ages ago.

Anxiously, I look through my peephole. My heartbeat speeds up. And my stomach flutters.

It's Logan!

What is he doing here? Did I tell him where I live yesterday? I can't remember. With all that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, my brain is mush. I undo the safety chain, then fumble with the deadbolt with my left hand.

"Hold on," I call out as I twist and turn it. The old lock is stiffer than a dead body in rigor mortis. For a second, I think of Barbara and shudder. Finally, it gives and I swing the door open.

He faces me squarely. He's wearing jeans, a beanie, a distressed leather jacket, thick gloves, and workman boots. A lovely plaid scarf is wrapped around his neck, and dangling from his hand is a small brown paper bag.

"Merry Christmas," he says with the cutest lopsided grin I've ever seen.

"Same to you," I say, wondering how he got into the building. So jumpy, I don't ask and instead mumble, "Um... er... what are you

doing here?"

That adorable grin hasn't left his face. "I got this for you before we closed up shop last night." He holds up the bag. I recognize it and can smell its contents. A rich coffee aroma drifts up my nose.

"It's a bag of our special Christmas blend. Plus, a mug."

"Thank you." I beam. "That's so thoughtful. It smells delicious!"

Out of habit, I reach for the bag with my bandaged right hand as he passes it to me.

The smile falls off his face. His eyes grow wide. "Sloan, what happened to your hand?"

More stuttering. "Um, uh, I went for a walk and slipped in the snow. I think I sprained it." Well, that's all kind of true. Maybe the best lies are closest to the truth.

His eyes stay fixed on my hand. "Your fingers! They're so red and swollen."

Glancing down at them, I grimace. They're puffier than earlier. And more discolored.

"Can you move them?"

Mutely, I shake my head.

"Let me take a look at your wrist." Another command.

Before I have a chance to respond, he ushers me into my apartment and closes the door behind him. It makes a bang. Everything in this ancient apartment has its own unique sound. The furnace clanks, the water sputters, and the windows rattle. And let's not forget the creaky floorboards. It's almost like a cacophonous symphony.

He leads me to my couch and sits down, taking off his gloves and making himself comfortable. I feel on edge as he briefly scans my shabby apartment.

"Sit," he orders, with a jut of his dimpled, stubbly chin. I've never heard him sound this way before. Bossy. Authoritative. Alpha. I have to admit I like it.

I do as he asks and lower myself to the couch on the cushion next to him, as gracefully as I can, given all the pain I'm in. That combined with my turmoil of emotions. And raging hormones.

"Show me your wrist." Turning to face me, he tenderly takes my hand in his. Even the tiniest of motions makes me wince.

Silently, I watch as he unwraps the Ace bandage. My hand trembles. I'm not sure it's because of the intense pain or because of the way I feel having him touch me.

I'm reminded of the time in tenth grade when he walked me home from school and we had a heated discussion about Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. While arguing that the weak salesman protagonist should have transformed into a fierce bumble bee instead of a lowly fly, me the klutz tripped over a crack in the sidewalk and badly scraped my knee. Verging on tears, I held them back as Logan scooped me up, threw me over his shoulder, and carried me home. I sat on this very couch in my parents' living room as he tenderly bandaged up my bloody knee. He was everything to me. My hero.

Until he wasn't.

This memory alive in my head, I watch as he lets the elastic bandage curl onto the floor, and his eyes grow wide.

"Jeez, this is really bad. You really did a number."

I glance down at my hand. It's fifty shades of purple and swollen beyond recognition. Both my knuckles and knobby wrist bone have disappeared. I make a repulsed faced, then bravely say, "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Sloan, this is major. I think it's broken. You need to go to the ER."

Five minutes later, I'm back in my puffer and beanie, my coat half on me as I can't get my hand through the sleeve. Yeah, it's bad.

Before I know it, we're in Logan's Ford pickup truck, the blue one he named Bessie and drove in high school, on our way to Saint Barnabas Medical Center.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wow! What an ordeal. We get to the hospital, located in nearby Livingston, in no time thanks to the plowed main road, but who knew the emergency room would be a madhouse on Christmas Day. It's filled with hacking coughers of all ages as well as kids and adults with Christmas-related injuries—ranging from cut-off fingertips from carving a turkey to unfortunate accidents from playing with a new toy or sledding. The sweet little girl next to me crashed her new tricycle into a wall and split her chin open. Accident-prone me did that once. I still have a scar.

The long wait to be seen is an opportunity for me and Logan to chat. I get to learn more about him. Especially his time in the Peace Corps, including his bout with malaria. We also talk about our past emergency room visits.

“Have you ever broken anything?” I ask.

His expression grows distant, then darkens. “Do hearts count?”

Before I can ask him to elaborate, my name is called.

Two hours later after undergoing an X-ray of my wrist and a CT scan of my head, I'm sent home. My brain scan revealed I'm fine, but the X-ray revealed I've fractured my wrist. A bone called the distal radius, located below the thumb and the most commonly injured. The good news is the doctor on duty didn't think it'll require surgery, and should heal nicely over the next six weeks if I follow his instructions. Elevation and minimal activity.

Now sporting a hot pink fiberglass cast that goes up halfway up my right forearm and a navy-blue sling, Logan attentively escorts me out of the hospital.

He holds my other hand. His hand is warm and feels good.

Out of the blue, my stomach rumbles and so does his.

“Hey, you want to have dinner?” he asks.

“Yeah, that would be great.” I’ve hardly eaten a thing since last night and I’m starving.

“Cool.”

My heart flutters. My skin tingles. Is this a date?

To my disappointment, every decent restaurant we pass is closed on Christmas Day.

“Do you want to drive through a McDonald’s or a Burger King?” I ask forlornly. “My treat.” Fingers crossed—at least those on my left hand—my credit card is still working.

“Nah.” He gives me a sideways glance. “Do you have any wine at your place?”

“Yeah, I have a bottle of chardonnay.” A sad laugh escapes. “I probably would have drowned my sorrows with it last night, but I couldn’t uncork the bottle.”

He smiles. “And it’s highly unlikely, in fact impossible, you’ll be able to do it tonight.”

What’s he implying? We end up driving straight to my apartment. Logan parks Bessie outside my building. It’s not hard to find a spot. He kills the engine and an awkward stretch of silence follows until I break it.

“Hey, thanks for everything.”

“Sure. That’s what friends are for.”

Little sparks of nervous tension fill the air between us.

And then, I just blurt it out: “Would you still like to have dinner? I can microwave a mean mac and cheese.”

He grins that sexy lopsided grin again.

“And I can uncork that bottle of chard.”

I NEVER KNEW FROZEN mac and cheese and a cheap bottle of wine could taste so good. It must be the company. Eating alone night after night (not counting Moo) is not very appetizing. It sucks.

We eat in the living room, sitting on the area rug around my coffee table. My companion even finds some atmospheric Christmas music on my rinky-dink sound system. Moo seems to like him and hangs out under the table rather than hiding in my bedroom.

Like the wine, the conversation flows. Logan is easy to talk to. He always has been. He asks me questions and has a sense of humor. He even tells me he finds my ugly Christmas sweater hilarious. I tell him my mother has the worst taste in the world.

I eat clumsily with my left hand as Logan tells me about his dreams. Despite going to law school, he hasn't let go of his childhood dream. He still aspires to write a book one day. Become a novelist. *Like me*. I tell him how much I've struggled.

He stabs a fork into the very orangey mac and cheese. I think it's made with Velveeta.

"So, what is it like to work for Barbara Van Wyck?" he asks, drawing the forkful close to his mouth.

At the mention of her name, I almost drop my wine glass. "It was awful."

His eyebrows lift before he takes a bite. "Was?"

I take a giant gulp of my wine. I've drunk too much. I can't tell him I found her dead and left her slumped over her typewriter. Luckily, I think fast. "I-I quit my job yesterday."

He looks more amused than surprised. "That bad?"

"Worse than bad." My voice sounds stronger. Maybe because I'm telling the truth. "Did you ever meet her?"

He swallows his forkful of mac and cheese. "Never. Not once."

"Trust me, she made Cruella de Vil look like Cinderella."

Logan laughs hard, then asks, "What are you going to do?"

"Finish the book I'm writing and hopefully sell it."

His eyes light up. "You're writing something new?"

I foolishly drink more wine and nod. "Yes."

"What's it about?"

"Um, uh, I can't tell you. I don't want to jinx it."

"Can you let me read a few pages?"

“Not yet... I’m still polishing it.”

“Can you at least tell me the title?”

“I don’t have one yet.” God, I’m good at lying! Maybe it’s the wine. “But I promise you’ll be the first one to read it when it’s done.”

He smiles brightly. “I can’t wait. And if you want a beta reader—someone to read your first draft and give you input—I’m your man. Just send it my way. I can even read it tonight.”

I tell him I will when it’s ready. He’s so sweet! We continue to eat, drink, and talk. My stomach fills with butterflies and my heart flutters every time he laughs or smiles. I’ve never been *this* attracted to him.

Concerned about my fractured wrist, he clears the table and even hand-washes the dishes. Not surprisingly, my apartment doesn’t have a dishwasher.

He’s the perfect gentleman. So thoughtful. When nervous, klutzy me almost knocks my wine glass off the kitchen counter, he saves it. And when there’s no more wine to fill it with, he pours in his.

Taking a sip, I taste him on my tongue. And after several more, I yearn for him to kiss me.

Please kiss me.

“Well, I better be going,” he says after rinsing the wine glasses. I wish I had another bottle. “I have to get up early tomorrow. My shift starts at six a.m.”

We head back to the living room. He puts on his leather jacket, beanie, and scarf, and I walk him to the door. I fumble for words.

“Well, thanks for everything. You were my hero today.”

His face flushes. He tugs at his sexy scarf. “Well, you were a damsel in distress.”

I give a little laugh.

“Thanks for dinner,” he says, sounding as much at a loss for words as I am.

Then without warning, he takes my face in his long-fingered hands and smacks a kiss on my lips that deepens and quickly becomes tongue driven. My left hand fists his ginger hair and I suddenly wish my right hand had mobility and wasn’t in a sling.

It’s the kiss of all kisses. Molecules are exploding in my body. Sparks are flying everywhere. My body’s on fire. My bones are melting and turning me into a glob of goo.

After God knows how long, he pulls away, looking as shell-shocked as I must look.

"I'll see you around, Sloan." A beat. "And don't forget about my offer." And with that he leaves.

Breathlessly leaning against it, I manage to close the door. That was the best kiss I've ever had. I more than liked it. And I more than like him. I always have.

It sent me into the stratosphere.

Still floating in space, as high as a kite, I'm not ready for sleep. Desperately needing to decompress, I plunk down on the couch and turn on the TV.

The local ten-o'clock news comes on. Cutting from the Ken-doll newscaster and his Barbie-look-alike co-anchor, a familiar face fills the screen.

A radiant thirty-something woman with a headful of blazing red hair. Her publicity shot. Maybe it was photoshopped because she sure as hell doesn't look like that now. Well, except for the wrinkle-free emerald green eyes.

My heartbeat quickening, my eyes stay glued to the screen. The cameras cut back to the anchors. The Ken doll:

"Breaking news... Celebrated bestselling author, Barbara Van Wyck, was found dead yesterday in her Maplewood, New Jersey, mansion, by her longtime housekeeper. While foul play is not suspected at this time, an autopsy is underway. According to her literary agent, Margo Bancroft, she was fifty-nine."

My heart still thudding, my throat constricting, I zap the TV off.

Maybe Logan didn't know she died earlier, but he and rest of the world will know by tomorrow morning. It'll be the talk of the town. And in a small town like Maplewood, news travels fast.

An autopsy. Does that mean the police will be involved? As I get ready for bed, a shiver skitters down my spine.

Will they want to talk to me?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A loud meow sounds in my ears. I feel Moo's soft fur brush against my neck. He meows again and my eyes flutter open. I wake up groggy. I didn't sleep well last night. I had both Barbara and Logan on my mind and I kept jumping between them like a channel hopper. Plus, because of my elevated arm, I had to sleep on my back when I prefer to sleep curled up on my side. Far from comfortable, it didn't help that my wrist was throbbing. It still is. The doctor said it might take a few days until the pain subsides. He gave me some strong painkillers, but I don't want to take them as I've read they're addictive.

I check the time on my iPhone that's next to me on my nightstand. Twisting and extending my left arm, I narrowly avoid pulling my rotator cuff. Just what I need. Another injury. Two arms in slings and possible surgery.

It's already after nine. I have a lot to do today. I forego a shower because of my fractured wrist and instead use a soapy washcloth to wash myself down. I also forego making a pot of coffee with my left hand as much I would love a cup of the blend Logan bought me. Clumsy me will likely drop the glass carafe and shatter it. No longer having a salary, I can't afford a new one.

The reality that I'm no longer working for Barbara sinks in. If I were still her PA, she would have fired my sorry ass for being so late. Now she's dead. She can't. I cackle silently to myself.

In retrospect, I should have asked Logan to prepare the coffee last night with the timer, but I wasn't thinking straight. And I definitely wasn't thinking about coffee.

Logan. All through my restless night, I relived his kiss. And as I manage to get dressed in something other than my jeans and ugly Christmas sweater, I relive it again and let out a heavy sigh.

After checking that my laptop with Barbara's, I mean, my manuscript, is still securely hidden under the mattress, I get ready for my excursion to The Village Bookstore. My arm still in a sling and unable to move my fingers even the tiniest bit, I'm surprised by how easily I get dressed with just my left hand. I must be more ambidextrous than I thought. I slip on some elastic-waist joggers, an oversized plaid flannel shirt, and a loose hoodie that I'm forced to leave unzipped. The only thing I struggle with is my puffer coat. Fortunately, it's roomy enough to accommodate my arm in its sling, and I'm able to snap it up with my left hand.

Before I leave, I feed Moo. I'm unable to open his can of food using my left hand so I just leave him a bowl of kibble. As finicky as he is, he'll live. He may just be a little pissed at me. Grabbing my backpack and keys, I leave the apartment. The door locks behind me. I'm just unsure how I'll manage to open the temperamental lock later with my left hand.

It's another nice day and the temperature is considerably warmer. The snow is already starting to melt and by mid-afternoon, I expect there will be piles of slush everywhere. Snow is only beautiful the day after a snowstorm, and then it turns to ugly gray slush. I identify with slush. My whole life I've been a slush puddle for people to step over. Not anymore. I've started a new chapter of my life, pun intended. Don't cross me.

I'm in dire need of some coffee. I debate whether to go to The Village Coffee Shop. Logan said he had an early shift. As much as I want to see him again, can I face him? I'll either be tongue-tied or say all the wrong things and put my foot in my mouth. Or come across as some cretin with a schoolgirl crush.

Against my better judgment, I decide to make a stop at the coffee shop. Chance it. I need my caffeine fix, I convince myself. When I get there, a mixture of relief and disappointment courses through

me. Logan's not here. Half-heartedly, I order a hot vanilla latte and a scone. Then head to The Village Bookstore.

I get a jolt. My eyes almost pop out of their sockets. In one of the windows, there's a huge poster of Barbara propped on an easel. The photo is the same as the one they showed last night on the evening news. Written above it: her name and the years she lived and below that, *In Loving Memory*. Surrounding the poster are artfully arranged copies of her books supported by shelves and stands.

I want to barf. If whoever created this window display knew what it was like to work for her, they would have written *Good Riddance* on the poster. In my head, I hear the *Wizard of Oz* munchkins singing, "Ding-Dong! The Witch is Dead."

Heaving a breath, I pull the front door open with my left hand and head inside.

The store is bustling. Customers are crowded around a rectangular table filled with stacks of Barbara's books. They're hoarding them like they're bars of gold. It's not like they're even signed. A small table banner with Barbara's image and name keeps getting knocked over. I roll my eyes.

There's another mass of people by the newspaper stand. In addition to books, The Village Bookstore sells magazines and newspapers—*The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and *Star-Ledger*. I push my way into the crowd and eye the *New York Times*. Sure enough, Barbara is front-page news. There's a picture of her in the lower right-hand corner, with the headline, *Bestselling Author Barbara Van Wyck Dies at Fifty-Nine*, and a reference to the page the complete story is on.

I'm eager to read it. I grab a copy—I'll pay for it later—and search for an empty reading table among the wall-to-wall books. A few people give me odd looks, probably because of my armless right sleeve. No, I didn't lose an arm from some horrible accident or flesh-eating disease. They're probably the same people who stop and gawk at gnarly car accidents. Holding up traffic, hoping to see a decapitated body hanging out of a door.

Maybe Barbara had the right idea about being a recluse. Not dealing with this cruel, judgmental world.

I manage to find a table. I set the bag with my latte and scone down, and take off my coat, hanging it behind my chair. I'm going to be here for a while.

I take a seat, then take out my coffee from the brown paper bag. I leave the scone inside it as the bookstore doesn't allow food. I'll pick at it while no one is looking. Wasting no time, I take a much-needed sip of my delicious, hot caffeinated beverage and immediately turn to page twenty-eight of the *New York Times* where the story about Barbara is featured above the obituaries.

The article, which includes her publicity photo, takes up about a half page. I learn a few things I never knew about her. Née Barbara Vanna Wick, she was born in Atlantic City, where her mother worked as a cocktail waitress and her father as a mechanic. Her early years were tumultuous. Her alcoholic father was abusive and ultimately left her struggling mother, who died shortly after. A straight-A student despite her hardships, she got a scholarship to Wellesley College, where she majored in English. Following graduation, she did some modeling and moved back to Atlantic City where she followed in her late mother's footsteps. While there, she penned her first novel, *From Here to There*, which became a huge bestseller. Shortly afterward, Barbara moved to Maplewood, purchasing a house that once belonged to an oil magnate. *Evergreen*.

The article goes on to talk about the other books she wrote, and the numerous awards and accolades she received.

Over the years, she was linked to several prominent people, including some famous Hollywood actors and Washington politicians, though mostly she chose to be a recluse, rarely seen in public.

I get to the last paragraph.

Ms. Van Wyck leaves behind no survivors. Details about her burial or a memorial service are unknown at this time.

Donations in her name can be made to RAINN.

I take out my phone and google RAINN. It stands for the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. It's the largest US organization offering both financial and emotional support to survivors of sexual abuse. I recall her writing a check out to this organization for twenty-

five thousand dollars and me mailing it to her financial manager. I never questioned what it was for.

I didn't think Barbara had a charitable bone in her entire body. And why did she choose this organization to support?

Staring at her photo isn't going to give me answers. And I have work to do. After a few more sips of my coffee, I gather a spiral notebook and a Scripto pen from my backpack and amble over to the section of the store where all the suspense and thriller books are kept. There is a wall of floor-to-ceiling shelves, the books arranged alphabetically by author. I'm shocked by how many book titles there are and by how popular this genre is. With her last name starting with "V," Barbara's books are on one of the top shelves. I'm going to need someone to help me because I can't reach the upper shelves nor gather too many books in my arms due my fracture.

I spot the lovely owner of the store, Marc Laroche. In his mid-to-late thirties, he's handsome in a bookish Clark Kent kind of way with his horn-rimmed glasses, khakis, button-down shirt, and sporty bow tie.

"*Bonjour!*" While born in the US, his parents are French and he has a trace of an accent, which adds to his charm. "What can I help you with, Sloan?"

His blue eyes twinkle as I tell him I'm doing a research project (which is true), and will need some help gathering books.

"What happened to your arm, *chérie*?" he asks with genuine concern, though I can't help feeling he's playfully flirting with me.

I simply tell him I fell on some ice and he obligingly finds someone to help me.

While the sales associate dashes off to find a ladder, I ask Marc, "Who would you say are the top literary suspense writers?"

"Definitely, Agatha Christie is one." He goes on. "Patricia Highsmith, Daphne du Maurier—"

I stop him. "I mean, writing today and making bestseller lists." Except for Barbara and a few others, I'm not familiar with most suspense authors as it's not my preferred genre. Mostly, I read young adult books, hoping to be inspired to write another one of my own. My first attempt did not work out and was rejected by every agent in town. That resulted in a major writer's block.

I stop in my thoughts as the dashing bookstore owner reels off a long list of names and offers to write them down in my notebook. Among them, Lucy Foley, Riley Sager, and Ruth Ware.

“And of course, there’s our very own Barbara Van Wyck.” I cringe. “Such a *tragédie* she died on Christmas Eve.”

Though I detect a dash of sarcasm in his voice, I agree. I’m not sure he knows I worked for her, though I’ve been to the store numerous times to take photos of Barbara’s books. She was obsessed with her books’ visibility and shelf life. I decide not to tell him the nature of my research project and I’m glad he doesn’t inquire.

“Any debut writers you can think of who recently made a bestseller list?” I ask, after thanking him for writing down all the thriller author names.

Before he can reply, he jerks his head away from me and sneezes.

“*Pardon*. I think I may have caught a bit of a cold last night.” He pulls out a handkerchief from a pocket, blows his nose, and then faces me again. He looks a little flushed.

Twisting his lips, he thinks hard for a moment. “Nina Simon... *Mother-Daughter Murder Night*. An excellent book. We couldn’t keep it on the shelves after Reese picked it up for her book club.”

Becoming a Reese’s Book Club Pick should only happen to me. But first things first. I need to find an agent. And getting published would be a good thing too.

The spiky-haired sales associate returns with a ladder. Pulling out the sheet of paper with the author names from my notebook, Marc explains to him that I need a book from each of them. After wishing me good luck in French with my project, he skirts off. The sales associate retrieves over a dozen books and follows me to my table.

With the books stacked on the table, I get to work.

You’d think this would be easy, but it’s not because I don’t have any use of my writing hand. Flipping to the acknowledgment page in the back of each book with my left hand takes more time than I thought and writing down agents’ names legibly takes even more time. I am definitely not ambidextrous.

With the help of the sales associate, I return the books to the shelves and get another batch. He recommends some new, up-and-coming authors I should check out. Great idea. That's me. The next up-and-coming author.

Two tedious hours later, I've collected the names of close to three dozen literary agents who might want to represent me. And *Black Lies*.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It's 2 p.m. and I'm starving. Before trekking home, I make a stop at The Village Pizzeria and buy a slice of pepperoni pizza. Bad idea. Eating it with my left hand, the cheesy, tomato sauce gets all over my white puffer. Hopefully it'll come out with a little elbow grease and Clorox. *Clorox... for whiter whites, and brighter brights.* Whoever came up with that line must have gone on to be a great writer.

I long to make one more stop at The Village Coffee Shop to say hello to Logan, but with the crimson stains all over my coat (and possibly on my chin), I nix the idea.

It takes me only five minutes to walk home since I live in town right on Maplewood Avenue. Fortunately, Mrs. Cruikshank is coming out of the building so I don't have to use my key to get in. She reminds me my rent is due in less than a week. And asks me nothing about my broken wrist. I want to smack her with my cast.

I trudge upstairs and manage to open my apartment door with my left hand in one try. The lock gods must be looking out for me.

Moo meets me at the door and follows me to my bedroom. I make a beeline for my bed and lift up the mattress. Phew! My computer with my manuscript is still under it.

Without wasting a second, I head to my desk, open my laptop, and start googling all the literary agents' names I collected. This takes longer than I expected because I have no use of my right-hand fingers. I still can't get them to move. Three hours later, I have a list of all their email addresses. My right hand throbs, my back hurts, my

eyes are blurry. I look outside my window. The sky has darkened. My stomach growls.

I finally take off my coat. After stretching my legs, I shut down my laptop and close the lid. I'm too beat to start querying all the agents. Tomorrow is another day, as Scarlett O'Hara once wisely said. Though maybe since she never got Rhett back, it wasn't so wise.

At that thought, my phone rings. I retrieve it from my backpack and look down at the caller ID screen.

It's Logan!

My heart pitter-patters as I accept the call.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," he parrots. "I know this is last minute, but I was wondering... would you like some company?"

"Um... uh..."

"I can bring over some Chinese takeout and a couple of Sapporos."

"Sure, that sounds great."

"Cool." I can hear a smile in his voice. "I'll be there around six."

"Great. See you then." The call ends.

I glance at the time. It's 5:45. *Yikes*. I only have fifteen minutes to straighten my apartment. And get ready. I take a whiff of my armpits. *Whoof!* I so wish I could take a shower.

At exactly six o'clock, the intercom buzzes.

It's Logan. I let him up. He knocks on my door.

I swing it open and he's standing before me with an ear-to-ear grin on his face and holding up a large brown paper bag. The top of the bag is rolled up.

"DoorDash," he deadpans.

It's not that funny, but I laugh anyway.

"God that smells delicious!" It really does. All the garlicky goodness wafts up my nose. And heat radiates from the bag. "Come on in. I'm starving."

Upon entering, Logan places the containers of Chinese food—four in total—on the walnut coffee table along with the chilled bottles of Sapporo beer. Plus, a stack of paper napkins, some chopsticks, and two cellophane-wrapped fortune cookies.

He follows me to the kitchen to get plates and place mats. I've often eaten Chinese food straight from the container when I'm alone.

We return to the living room and I set the place mats down. Logan, in turn, sets down the plates, placing a paper napkin and a pair of the chopsticks next to each.

The table set, we sit down side by side on the lumpy couch, which I've covered with a silk shawl I found at a garage sale. Logan breaks into a sneezing fit and his eyes begin to tear.

"Are you okay?" I ask, alarmed.

"It's my allergies."

I eye Moo who's curled under the table. "Oh no! Are you allergic to cats?"

Sneezing, he shakes his head. "No, I think it's the shawl. I have this weird allergy to old silks."

He stands up and blows his nose with a paper napkin while I remove the shawl and hurry to my bedroom where I toss it into my closet. When I return, Logan is seated back down on the couch, with the cushions turned over. He's no longer sneezing or tearing and has turned the TV on to *World News Tonight with David Muir*. The volume is low and not distracting.

"How does your wrist feel?" he asks, twisting open the beer bottle caps.

"Better when you're around."

A flush crawls up his neck all the way to his cheeks. "Someone once told me I have healing powers."

I hope it wasn't a girl. "I bet you have a *lot* of powers."

His ears pinken. Score one for me.

He opens the white plastic containers. "I hope you like Chinese food."

"I love it. I ate it all the time while I was at college." I crane my neck to look what's inside them. Beef with broccoli... cashew chicken... vegetable lo mein... and white rice. All piping hot.

"This all looks delicious," I say, aroused by the tantalizing aroma. "I didn't know there was a Chinese restaurant in Maplewood."

"There isn't. I got it in Bloomfield where my aunt lives."

Bloomfield is a blue-collar town close to Maplewood. A few miles to the northeast. "I'm surprised the food didn't get cold."

"I had the heat on in my pickup. It kept everything warm." He turns to look at me. "What would you like?"

A taste of you. "A little bit of everything."

"Great. I didn't know if you're now vegetarian, so I got a vegetable lo mein just in case." A beat. "And the rice."

"No, I'm not vegetarian. There's almost nothing I won't eat." Why does that sound a bit perverted?

Using his chopsticks, he doles out some of everything onto my plate, then does the same for himself. Then he picks up his amber beer bottle and says, "*Bon appétit.*"

With my left hand, I pick up mine and clink it against his. "Cheers."

We each take a long sip and then with a smile he tells me to dig in.

I watch as he deftly picks up a big helping of the lo mein with his chopsticks. After swallowing the heap, he looks at me with concern. "Why aren't you eating?"

Embarrassment sweeps over me. "Um, er, could you possibly get me a fork?" There's no way I can maneuver chopsticks with my left hand. Uncoordinated me can barely manage them with my right one.

He pulls a face. Smirks. "You can't eat Chinese food with a fork. The metal ruins the flavor."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. "Well, the only choice I have then is using my other eating utensil... my hand."

His smirk morphs into a smile. "Well, you know, in many African nations, people use their hands to eat. I did all the time while I was in the Peace Corps."

I don't know why, but suddenly I begin to cry. Maybe I'm getting my period. Maybe it's a culmination of the past twenty-four hours. Discovering Barbara dead. Stealing her manuscript. Falling for Logan. A combination of everything. My shoulders heave and tears stream down my cheeks. Sniffles accompany the soft sobs that spill from lips.

Logan's expression grows somber and he looks at me compassionately. He takes my left hand in both of his. "Jeez, Sloan, I'm sorry. I should have been more sensitive about your fracture. Here, let me help."

My watering eyes stay on him as he dips his chopsticks back into the lo mein container and gathers up another bunch of the saucy noodles.

He leans into me. "Open," he says in that sexy, commanding voice I love.

Still sniffing, I do as he asks. I tilt back my head and think I must look like I'm at the dentist getting a cavity drilled, my mouth wide open. He deftly drops the noodles inside. I close my mouth and swallow. I haven't had a chance to savor the flavor when I feel his lips on mine. Oh my God. He's kissing me again.

He tastes delicious. He deepens the kiss, and then moves his lips down the side of my neck. Who knew how sensitive it was. I moan as he showers me with butterfly kisses, intermittently flicking my skin with his talented tongue.

"God, Sloan, I can't get enough of you."

The same. I tangle the fingers of my good hand in his tousled hair. And tug at it.

Things are getting heated. We're making out like two teenagers. He undoes the buttons of my top and reaches under my front-closing bra when the local news comes on and jolts us both. He pulls away. Two plastic-looking anchors, sitting side by side behind a news desk, one male, the other female, grimly stare us in the face. The male one begins.

"Good evening and welcome to *ABC7 Eyewitness News*. Tonight's top story... An autopsy today revealed that bestselling author, Barbara Van Wyck, who was found dead in her Maplewood, New Jersey, home two days ago on Christmas Eve, did not die of natural causes as previously reported. It is now believed she died of asphyxiation."

My stomach churns as the anchor cuts away to Maplewood's Chief of Police, who held a press conference earlier today. The balding, otherwise nondescript, uniformed man is behind a podium, and after a briefing, answers a journalist's questions.

"Has a suspect been arrested?... Any leads?"

"No, no one at this time has been apprehended. We do, however, have a person of interest."

A person of interest? I want to vomit. Is he talking about me?

The broadcast cuts back to the newscasters. "This is Maplewood's first murder in over five years. ABC7's Eyewitness News Team will keep you up to date as details unfold."

Shaking her head, the female anchor chimes in. "This is just terrible, Ed."

Ed, the male anchor, nods his head in agreement. "Police ask that you call this number if you have any information. All tips will be kept confidential."

An 800 number flashes on the screen. Just as fast, it flashes out of my head.

Before they move on to the next story, I zap the TV off. My heart is in my throat, my stomach in knots. I couldn't eat another thing if I tried.

Logan seems as shocked as I am. "Holy shit. I heard she died. In fact, I meant to ask you how you felt." He shakes his head in disbelief. "But murder? Who'd want to kill her?"

Me. "Logan, I'm really freaked out. Do you think we could call it a night?"

He looks crestfallen, but rebounds. "Sure. I understand. Keep the Chinese food."

I give him a thin, grateful smile. "Thanks for understanding. How about a rain check?" That's if I'm not thrown in jail and held there without bail.

He smiles back. "Deal. I'll call you tomorrow." He pauses, his expression growing somber. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

Does he want to talk about *us*? I'm so worked up I don't know how I can have that conversation.

After walking him to the door and giving him a peck on his cheek, I sink back into the couch and stare blankly at the Chinese food as it grows cold.

The plot has thickened. Not only am I a thief, but now I'm a murder suspect. Logan gone, I reach for one of the fortune cookies with my left hand. I bite off the cellophane wrapping with my teeth and crack the rice cookie in half. I slide out the tiny strip of paper inside and read it.

Once you lie, you can never be truthful.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The judge: "What do you have to say for yourself, Sloan White?"

I stand.

"I'm innocent, Your Honor. I didn't kill Barbara Van Wyck. Please, you have to believe me!"

The judge's eyes drill into mine. "Once you lie, you can never be truthful."

"I'm a book thief! Not a murderer!"

The judge folds his arms across his chest. "How else would you have been able to steal her manuscript? I don't think she would have simply handed it to you."

"I found her dead and stole it." My scratchy orange jumpsuit is itching me all over. "I promise to give it back."

"Wouldn't you say it's a little too late?" The ancient judge frowns. "Ms. White, you lied to the court. You committed perjury. Lied under oath. Another punishable offense."

I shudder. "Please—"

The judge bangs his gavel. "Enough, Ms. White. Please sit down."

As I slowly lower myself to the hard wooden chair, the judge looks askance at the jury. "Mr. Foreman, has the jury reached a verdict?"

The foreman rises. "Yes, we have, Your Honor. We, the jury, have unanimously found the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree."

I leap to my feet and cry out in anguish.

The judge scowls at me. "Sloan White, you are hereby sentenced to life in prison. Have fun writing your next book in your jail cell."

"Nooooo!"

"Case dismissed!" With a smug, triumphant smile, he bangs his gavel again.

Then another thunderous bang wakes me up from my nightmare. My eyes snap open. I think it's coming from my front door.

Please just make it be Mrs. Cruikshank asking for my rent.

In a cold sweat, my heart pounding, I maneuver myself out of bed. I check that my laptop is still under my mattress. It is.

Shrugging on my fuzzy robe and then my butt-ugly sling, I amble to the door to my apartment and look through the peephole. My heart skips a beat, my chest tightens.

It's unmistakably him!

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

My heart thunders. Another heavy-fisted knock sounds at the door.

“Essex County Police... Open up!”

The gruff, Jersey-accented voice is the same too. He hasn’t changed a bit.

My heart still thudding, my fingers quivering, I manage to open the lock with my left hand and swing the door open. I look up at him. The burly man is a few pounds heavier, but other than that he looks exactly the same with his ruddy complexion and shiny swath of jet-black hair. He’s even wearing the same wrinkled tan trench coat, beneath which I can see his holster. The coat’s unbuttoned.

It’s Detective Frank McGrath from the Maplewood Police Department, the then forty-five-year-old detective who investigated the high school incident I’ve tried not to relive. He was never convinced it was an accident.

I nervously clear my throat. “Um, er, Detective McGrath. What are you doing here? I thought you were moving to Arizona.”

“Changed my mind.”

“How did you get up here?”

“Your landlord let me in.” Damn Mrs. Cruikshank. “May I come in?”

He looks like he means business. This isn’t the time for a let’s-catch-up-over-coffee conversation. I let him in and he closes the door behind him.

"Where would you like me to sit?" he asks, surveying my hole-in-the-wall living room. It's not like he has a lot of choices. It's either the couch or the cowhide armchair. Or the floor.

"Anywhere you'd like."

He chooses the couch and sits down heavily on it. I hear the springs groan. He straddles his stocky legs, and I notice he's wearing the same scuffed-up, non-skid brown shoes he's always worn. He loosens the drab wool scarf circling his neck.

"Can I get you some coffee?" Though I don't have a pot made, I offer some anyway. Nor do I have any donuts to soften him up.

"No, thanks. Have a seat. I'd like to ask you some questions." He takes out a small notepad and a blue ballpoint pen from his breast pocket. I notice how meaty his hand is.

Having no choice, I sit down on the cowhide armchair opposite him.

Ignoring Moo, who brushes against his polyester twill slacks, he wastes no time getting started. "I'd like to talk to you about Barbara Van Wyck."

My throat constricts. I let him go on.

"As you likely must know, she was found dead in her house by her maid on Wednesday, the day before Christmas. An autopsy revealed she was strangled."

I clasp my good hand to my mouth, acting like I'm surprised.

"Is her maid a suspect?" I blurt out. While the maid is always to blame in so many thriller books and TV shows, her longtime ninety-nine-pound maid, Priscilla, couldn't harm a fly. Priscilla was the perfect maid for barb-tongued Barbara. She was mute and couldn't answer back, no matter how cruel Barbara was.

"No, we've ruled her out. She has an alibi that checked out." With a frown, he pauses. "And please, let me ask the questions."

I remain silent, my skin buzzing with apprehension. Where is he going with this?

"A sweep of her house found *your* fingerprints all over her office as well as on the front door and parts of the kitchen."

I gulp. My fingerprints are in the New Jersey database from having been previously investigated.

"Can I ask, why we found them in her house?"

I don't need to lie. "I'm her PA... her personal assistant. I mean *was*."

He nods. "I see. How long have you worked for her, or should I say *did* you work for her?"

"Two years." *Too long*. He jots the information down in his notepad while a bored Moo scampers to the kitchen.

"The estimated time of death was sometime Wednesday morning between 10 a.m. and noon. Can you please tell me where you were during that time?"

"I was here. In my apartment. I wasn't feeling well and stayed home from work." I bite my lip. Why did I say that?

His dark eagle eyes stay focused on me. "Well, interestingly, several shop owners in town said they saw you running errands for her during that time period. We found a paper bag by the front door with some miscellaneous groceries plus a book you bought at the local bookstore.

Busted!

I feel myself flush, though it would have been nice of him to have brought me my book, especially since I have nothing to read other than my manuscript. Then I remember he doesn't do nice.

"Sorry, I must be confusing Wednesday with Tuesday, the day before," I tell him.

C'mon, Sloan, get it together.

"Did you have any contact with Ms. Van Wyck when you returned to her house after your outing?"

"Um, yeah. I went to her office and told her I was back with her coffee and supplies."

"And what state was she in?"

"New Jersey."

"No, Ms. White, what I mean is what condition was she in?" I detect exasperation in his voice.

"I believed she was sound asleep. She was hunched over her desk, her eyes closed, and she didn't respond."

More notes. He flips a page. "I see. And you didn't check to see if she was *really* asleep?"

I shake my head. "No. She falls asleep often at her desk and doesn't like to be disturbed."

Another lie. Sometimes I've wondered if she *ever* sleeps.

"And then you simply went home?"

"Well, it was Christmas Eve. She told me earlier I could have the afternoon off, so I left."

"In the bag, there was a receipt for a bottle of cognac that wasn't there. Can you explain this?"

Think, Sloan, think.

My wrist throbbing, a credible explanation comes to me. "Well, I had a little accident on the walk back to her house. I slipped and fell. And fractured my right wrist. I thought the cognac would dull the pain and Barbara wouldn't miss it. She was very generous with me."

He looks at me skeptically. I wonder if he knows Barbara personally. Generous is not the word anyone would use to describe her, though she did make a surprisingly sizeable contribution to that sexual assault organization.

He gazes at my pink cast. "Sorry about your arm." *Yeah right.* "Did you seek medical attention right away?"

"No. A friend of mine took me to the emergency room on Christmas Day."

"Can you tell me the name of your friend?"

"Logan Peterson."

He knits his bushy brows together. I'm not sure if Logan was interrogated in regard to the Mackenzie incident.

"Can you tell me where he lives?"

"Somewhere in Bloomfield with his aunt."

"Do you know her name?"

I shake my head. "Sorry, I don't, but he works part-time at The Village Coffee Shop... Oh, and he can verify I was in town when the murder occurred." I bite my bottom lip again, sorry that I've gotten Logan involved. The next time I bite it I'm going to draw blood.

He leans into me, placing his elbows on his knees. "Was there anyone else at Ms. Van Wyck's house on Wednesday morning?"

"Not that I know of." I refrain from telling him that I felt that someone was there, watching me. Then suddenly I remember something.

"Her literary agent may have visited her. Barbara told me she was coming later in the morning."

McGrath's curiosity is piqued. "I see. Can you tell me her name?"

"Margo Bancroft. Her literary agency is in the city. I can look up her number on my cell if you want."

"Don't bother. We can find it." He jots down her name in his notebook. "What kind of relationship did they have?"

"Um, purely platonic." Though I've often wondered that. Sometimes they acted like an old married couple.

Again, my interrogator huffs out a frustrated breath. "No, I mean, professionally."

"Um, very straightforward. They've been together forever. Margo launched Barbara's career and vice versa. They're—I mean they were—extremely tight."

McGrath seesaws his pen between his fingers. "Did they ever fight?"

"Yes, all the time. In fact, just this week..." My voice trails off.

"Please go on."

"I heard them bickering on the phone about money and the deadline for Barbara's latest novel. She was behind schedule and Margo wasn't happy about that."

"Did Ms. Bancroft threaten Ms. Van Wyck?"

"I'm not sure. But I did hear Barbara bark into the phone when Margo gave her a drop-dead deadline. 'January first?... Over my dead my body!'"

The detective digests the information I've given him. Does he suspect Margo Bancroft? In the cutthroat publishing world, she was figuratively a killer—a force to be reckoned with and feared—but that doesn't make her a real-life murderer. Or does it? His face impassive, the pensive detective holds my gaze and changes the subject.

"Can you tell me what Ms. Van Wyck was wearing?"

I nod. "The same thing she always wears. Her black mink coat and a silk kerchief—an Hermès scarf."

"Was she wearing anything else?"

"Yes. I believe she was wearing her usual black silk pajamas beneath the coat. Along with her monogrammed velvet slippers."

I caught sight of the latter once when she got up to use the toilet. I've never met anyone with such incredible bladder control. Or so

constipated. Just one look at her pinched face could tell you that.

The burly detective scratches at a cluster of small, crescent-shaped scars that intersect his left eyebrow. It's as if someone tore at his skin with their fingernails. Then, he scribbles my words down. "Anything more? A belt? A piece of jewelry?"

"Her glasses. They were dangling from her head when I found her."

The detective nods again. "Yes, we found them and bagged them." His eyes stay fixed on me. "Anything else?"

Think, Sloan, think. I blink hard and the bling glimmers in my head. "Yes, her gold watch. I think it's a Cartier."

Detective McGrath furrows his brows, his beady eyes narrowing. "Hmm... that's interesting. Because she wasn't wearing a watch when her body was found."

"That means someone must have stolen it." A bright idea comes to me. It'll get him off my back. I grow animated. "She must have been burglarized and the burglar killed her when they heard me come in!"

He frowns again. "Please, Ms. White, let *me* be the one to draw conclusions."

He rubs his cleft chin. "Did *you* steal it?"

My nerves buzz. He still thinks I may have killed her.

"Absolutely not! I'm not a thief!" *Liar!* I stole her manuscript! Is that a crime?

"Was anything else stolen?" I ask, my voice wavering. Maybe underpaid Priscilla stole it, but I don't want to implicate the poor woman.

"Not that we could find."

I hope he's being honest with me.

"Um, did any surveillance cameras catch anything?" I know for a fact that Barbara didn't have any, again a manifestation of her aversion toward technology.

In a single word, the feisty detective confirms what I already know. "No... and there were no CCTV cameras in the vicinity of her residence."

Relief washes over me. Though a killer may be on the loose, that means the police have no idea I stole her manuscript. The chances

of me going to jail have diminished significantly.

"I have a few more questions and then I'll leave you be."

What are you waiting for?

"Shoot." I regret my word choice. Not exactly one you'd say to an armed cop.

"Did anyone else besides you and her maid have access to Ms. Van Wyck's house?"

I shake my head. "Not that I can think of. She had a concierge doctor and esthetician... and even a mobile dentist... but I had to buzz them in. And all of them are out of town for the holidays."

"Did Ms. Van Wyck have any enemies?"

"A lot of authors hated her. They were jealous of her success."

"Enough to kill her?"

"I can't answer that, Detective."

"What about her fans?"

"I answered all her fan mail and I never got a hate letter. They loved her."

"Did any of them stalk her?"

"Not to my knowledge. She was a recluse and never left her house."

"No crazy emails? Snail mail? Social media posts? Gifts?"

"Nope."

"Hmm." His lips press together. "What kind of relationship did *you* have with her?"

"I would describe it as professional."

"How did she treat you?"

"With respect. She was kind and generous." I silently snort. She treated me like an indentured servant. I go on. "Sometimes I felt like the child she never had."

A muscle in McGrath's jaw tics, then he asks the question I've been dreading.

"Do *you* have reason to have killed her, Ms. White?"

His gaze lingers on my face, searching for the slightest twitch.

I flinch at his question. Truth is, I have a gazillion reasons to have killed her. She was a complete and utter bitch who treated me like shit.

"Of course not!" I retort, quashing those thoughts. Then a pause. "Am I a suspect, Detective?" He's always believed I was guilty of foul play, though he couldn't prove it.

"Everyone's a suspect until they're not."

And with that he puts away his notepad and pen. He stands and reaches into a pocket of his coat.

"Here's my card," he says, handing it to me. I glance down at it.

*Detective Frank McGrath
Essex County Homicide Task Force
877-847-7432*

"Call me if you can think of anything else."

"Will do," I say before a chilling thought steamrolls to the front of my brain.

Maybe I did kill her! After all, I didn't check if her heart was beating and if she was breathing. Maybe she was still alive and I could have saved her if I'd given her CPR or called 911 right after I fled from her house. But I didn't do either. Maybe deep down inside I wanted her dead.

I can't tell McGrath that I found Barbara dead and ultimately did nothing. Maybe that would be a crime of neglect. A sin of omission. Stifling my urge to confess, I bite down on my lip for the third time, for sure drawing blood.

Chilled to the bone, tasting iron, I walk him to the door where he says, "Be careful with that arm. It's slippery out there."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

With some coffee, the blend and ceramic mug both from Logan, I sink into my sofa, avoiding the spot where Detective McGrath sat earlier. A fed Moo curls up next to me and purrs. He has no idea what I've been going through. If he did, his back would be arching.

My emotions are in turmoil. Maybe I should confess that I found her dead and stole her manuscript. How long of a sentence would I get? If one at all?

But that wouldn't exonerate me from murdering her. If anything, McGrath might think I was desperate for her manuscript and strangled her. He's never trusted me. He doesn't like me.

While I didn't have a nightmare, I woke up feeling despondent and hopeless. Tired. Yesterday, I was so excited to query agents. But today, I've lost all my gumption. I feel like a criminal, though I haven't committed a crime. At least not a murder.

I wish I had someone to confide in. Someone who would understand my motives. My dreams. That's certainly not my mom who's absorbed in her new life with Cliff and only concerned about marrying me off.

It's times like this I wish I had a close friend. I think about Logan.

I'm sorry how things ended last night. I owe him an apology. Moreover, I should tell him that a Detective Frank McGrath may be coming by to question him as part of his investigation into Barbara's murder. I, at least, owe him that.

About to call him, my cell rings.

It's him! I pick up on the first ring.

"I was just about to call you," I say.

"Listen, Sloan." I can barely hear him. There's a lot of noise in the background.

"Logan, can you please talk louder. It's hard to hear you."

His voice grows louder. Clearer. "I'm sorry. I'm at the airport."

The airport? Newark International? "Are you picking up someone?"

A pause, then, "My flight's about to depart."

What?

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about last night."

My pulse ratcheting, I let him continue.

His voice wobbles. "I'm flying to California. Los Angeles." Another pause. "I'm going to finish my last year of law school at Loyola University. I got a scholarship—a full ride—and couldn't pass it up. I've always dreamed of going to LA and working in the entertainment business."

Processing his words, I inhale and exhale from my nose. There's no point in me telling him about Detective McGrath.

"When did you find out?"

"Five days ago. Right after our encounter at The Village Coffee Shop."

Why did he lead me on? The hurt I feel is all-consuming.

He continues. "Sloan, I hope you understand... Can we still be friends?"

Seriously?

"No, Logan." My voice is a shaky whisper. That or a sob.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Tears are burning the backs of my eyes. "Please don't ask me again. Goodbye, Logan, and good luck."

I end the call and lose it. It feels like someone has ripped out my heart and squeezed it in their hand. I burst out crying.

The tears pouring, I bury my head against my sling. Soaking it with a combination of tears and snot, I cry until I can cry no more. My well of tears has dried up.

I catch my breath and pull off the ugly blue thing. Tossing it across the room.

My wrist feels a little better and I can wiggle my fingers.
If Logan can pursue his dreams, so can I.
Dreams can come true, right?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Screw Logan

Screw McGrath.

With single-minded determination, I clomp to my desk and begin to send out my query letter and *my* manuscript to one agent after another. Moo keeps me company, curled up on my bed.

It doesn't take as long as I thought it would. All I have to do is cut and paste the letter, insert the agent's name, and add the attachment. It helps that I finally have a bit of mobility in my right-hand fingers. By a little after two, I've sent it to all the agents on my list from my new author Gmail address. My wrist is throbbing again. I may have overdone it.

Now, it's a waiting game. I'm going to take a break.

Returning to the living room, Moo following me, I turn on the TV to a random channel. The screen comes to life. My eyes pop. It's a replay of a rare NBC interview Barbara did with some dapper CNN talk show host named Dick Cavett in 1994, the year I was born, following the success of her first few bestsellers. He came to her house. About my age, almost thirty years old, she doesn't look much different than she looked the other day. Just a bit younger. And way more alive. Dressed in her black mink, silk pajamas, velvet slippers, and Hermès silk kerchief, she gives Dick a tour of her office. All the while she's smoking a skinny, charcoal black cigarette, inhaling and exhaling gray clouds of smoke.

Not bothered by the smoke, Dick is intrigued by her red Selectric. She tells him she acquired it at a famous writer's yard sale while she was a waitress, something I never knew.

The celebrity interviewer lifts his brows. "Barbara, I must admit I'm surprised you don't use a computer."

She gives a throaty laugh and lovingly brushes her manicured fingers across the keyboard. "Puh-lease. They're so overrated. *This* is my baby."

He chuckles. "Can we sit and chat a bit?"

"Of course. This is a talk show." She leads him to two burgundy velvet armchairs that face each other. Between them is a small round table with two glasses of water.

Dick asks her a series of questions. About where she gets her inspiration. Her favorite book. What the secret to her success is. And more.

Dick: "Barbara, a lot of critics—and readers—have accused you of stealing other authors' books."

Barbara: "Plagiarism? That's utter rubbish!"

Dick: "I'm going to read a short passage from Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and then one from your book, *The Ungodly Mr. Smith*."

Gosh, even the titles are almost the same. I listen intently. Oh my God, they're almost word for word identical!

Unfazed, Barbara gives a dismissive wave of her bony hand. "Puh-lease. That's ridiculous. Obviously, great minds think alike. I'm a great admirer of Ms. Highsmith, though I think her books are terribly overrated."

She takes a sip of her water. I think it's really vodka.

"Barbara, we have time for one last question."

Smirking, she cocks her head and blows a dark puff of smoke into his face. "And what might that be, *Dick*?"

Her voice is dripping with a mixture of sarcasm and vitriol. She's practically called him a dickhead.

He nervously laughs. "How would you feel if someone stole one of *your* books?"

Her expression darkens. "God help that person." She turns her head as if she's looking straight at me. Her green eyes glint with a

mix of rage and vengeance. "I will be watching them from my grave. Trust me, they will pay."

I zap the TV off before they exchange goodbyes, and the closing credits roll.

Dread pools in the pit of my stomach. In my head, I see Barbara. She tugs at her knotted kerchief. Tightening it.

I know what you did.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

New Year's Eve comes and goes. I spend it alone with Moo and a cheap bottle of champagne. Cheers to being me. I think of Barbara and Logan and sing "Auld Lang Syne" out loud. At least my wrist is healing.

Good news: it doesn't need surgery.

Bad news: I haven't paid my rent or last month's. Mrs. Cruikshank is threatening to evict me. I manage to hold her off. I make one New Year's resolution: I'm going to get out of this dump whatever it takes.

Easier said than done. It's been a waiting game. Every day I check my author email inbox, hoping to see a reply from one of the agents I sent my manuscript to. At this point, it's truly no longer Barbara's as I've kept perfecting and perfecting it. The words sing my name.

To my great despair, I get rejection after rejection. The great majority of them standard form letters. Most of the agents are closed to new clients and submissions, but some of the rejections are my fault.

"You spelled Freida McFadden's name wrong," writes back one agent. "Obviously, you're a sloppy writer and I must pass on your submission."

Crap! I palm-slap my forehead. I spelled it Frieda MacFadden. Blame it on my lack of sleep. No, blame it on me for being so careless.

Another: "I'm no longer pursuing thriller books. The marketplace is saturated. I do, however, like your style. Do you by chance have a steampunk alien fantasy set in apocalyptic London?"

What the hell is that?

Another: "If you'd done proper research, you would have seen I require a synopsis. So, without reading your manuscript, I'm passing on it."

Ugh! I could kick myself. In grad school, I learned that most agents required them. A one-to-two-page summary of your book that includes the ending. I didn't think of composing one. I bet most of the agents I queried want one. And now it's too late.

Depression sets in. Each day I grow more pessimistic, more despondent. Will I have to self-publish? Abandon my dream? Until...

I get an email from an agent named Clarisse Young. A Harvard grad, both undergrad and the business school, she started her own agency and represents a lot of burgeoning authors. She loves *Black Lies* and wants to represent me!

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I have a choice to Zoom with Clarisse or meet her in the city. I opt for the latter. It feels good to get out of New Jersey and the thirty-minute train ride to Penn Station is relaxing. I catch another train to SoHo where Clarisse's office is located.

Stepping out of the subway station, I instantly feel energized. It's a cold January day, but not too cold, and the frenetic energy of bustling New Yorkers is contagious.

Clarisse's office is located in a renovated townhouse on Thompson Street. There are six tenants. One of them: The Clarisse Young Literary Agency. Fortifying myself with a deep breath, I push the intercom, now able to fully use the fingers of my still-in-a-cast right hand. A buzz sounds and the front door instantly unlocks. I quickly push it open. Clarisse's office is on the second floor of the three-story walk-up.

I'm met by a very good-looking twenty-something dude. Understatement. He's gorgeous with his toffee skin, chiseled features, and wide-set eyes as black as his slicked-back hair. Mario, Clarisse's flamboyantly gay assistant. Clad in skinny pink jeans, white designer sneakers, and a body-hugging pink cashmere crewneck, he waltzes through the reception area, a stunning medley of white leather, polished nickel, and glass, all artfully arranged on a light gray laminate floor, to welcome me. He kisses me on both cheeks. I instantly like him.

After taking my coat and mentioning that we're almost twinsies with my pink cast—which makes me laugh—he beckons me to follow him to Clarisse's office. Everything looks so chic and expensive. God knows what she's paying for this space.

The door of Clarisse's corner office is ajar. At first peek, I see it's twice the size of the reception area. And twice as nice with all the expensive artwork and floor-to-ceiling double-hung windows. Clarisse is sitting behind her immaculate glass and chrome desk, when Mario announces me. She looks up from what's she reading on her sleek laptop, and flashes a smile.

Mario hovering at the entrance, she rises and strides my way. She's about the same height as me but seems so much taller. Maybe because she's wearing pristine six-inch high heels and I'm wearing slush-stained sneakers. What was I thinking?

I study her. She's stunning. Sleek, slender, and sophisticated, she looks to be the same age as me. She's dressed in a bright yellow designer pantsuit, her shiny jet-black hair cut in a blunt black bob, with razor-sharp bangs that bring attention to her wide-set onyx eyes, striking cheekbones, and fire-red full lips. In a vague way, she reminds me a bit of Barbara.

She reaches out to shake my hand. Hidden behind my back, my right hand pops out.

She flinches, her eyes bulging with surprise at the sight of my pink cast. "Oh my, what happened?"

I tell her I slipped in the snow, fractured my wrist, and that the cast will be coming off in a few weeks which is true. *All* true.

She twitches a smile. "That's good to hear." Then pauses. "Would you like anything to drink... S.L.?"

Essel.

I notice she's holding a bottle of Perrier, but given how nervous I am, klutzy me will drop it or spill it, so I pass. "Thanks, but I'm good. And my real name is Sloan... Sloan White."

"I like it. It's strong. But S.L. Whitman works better. I love it. It has such a mysterious literary ring to it."

We exchange smiles, hers wide and toothy.

"So, let's sit and chat." She leads me to a pair of Hollywood Regency chairs, flanking the white couch and glass coffee table. A

lovely orchid plant adorns the table. "Make yourself comfortable."

I plunk down on one of them while she gracefully settles on the couch, curling her thin legs under her. I notice the soles of her black patent leather heels are red. Louboutins. Given the mega-expensive designer suit, the astronomical price of her shoes, and the unquestionably exorbitant rent, she's either super successful or a trust-fund baby.

"Thank you for coming into the city," she begins, her voice tinny.

"No prob. It was a quick, easy trip."

"Where do you live?"

"Um... Maplewood, New Jersey."

Her eyes widen. "The home of the late great Barbara Van Wyck. Such a pity she was murdered."

I detect a hint of contempt in her voice.

"Did they find the guy?"

Or gal.

"Not to the best of my knowledge." I don't tell her I could be the prime suspect.

Sipping her Perrier, she shakes her head. "It's such a pity. But personally, I've found her books hit or miss, some of them overrated."

My mouth is dry. Now wishing I had some water, I fumble for what to say. "Yeah, some are better than others."

"Did you by chance know her?"

My chest tightens. Should I tell her I was Barbara's assistant?

She keeps her eyes narrowed on me while I decide what to say. The little voice inside my head argues with itself. *Tell her. Don't tell her.*

Tell her. I clear my throat. "Actually, I did. I was her personal assistant and was the one who found her dead... though I didn't know she'd been murdered at the time."

Clarisse looks aghast. "Oh, my goodness! That must have been awful!"

I nod. "Yeah, it freaked me out."

Clarisse's curiosity is piqued. "What was she like to work for?"

"She was a great boss." I pick at a cuticle. "A mentor and true inspiration."

Clarisse smiles. "It's funny. When I read your manuscript, I got Barbara vibes. I mean, it's very different from her typical thrillers, but something about your voice reminded me of hers."

I force myself to stay calm and collected. "Thanks. I guess that's a compliment?"

"Absolutely!"

"Barbara had a big influence on my writing. She inspired my book." *She even wrote it.*

"Amazing! That will be a great hook in terms of selling and marketing it."

I'm beginning to regret I told her about Barbara. It's too close to the truth.

And now it's too late. The cat's out of the bag. Though I suppose it would have come out sooner or later. Several Maplewood Village shop owners know I worked for her. As does my big-mouth mother. Tell my mother, tell the world.

I squirm in my chair. "Do you really think you can sell *Black Lies*?"

"Totally!" she chirps. "Everyone's looking for the next great debut novel."

I don't tell her that every agent I sent it to passed on it for one reason or another. One being the thriller marketplace is too glutted and no one wants to take a chance on an unknown these days.

She takes another sip of her bubbly water. "I'm sure you must have gotten a lot of offers for representation."

"Yes, quite a few," I lie. I'm getting good at this.

"Well, I'm not going to ask you who because it's none of my business, but I will tell you that no one could feel more passionately about your book than I do."

I rub my cast. An annoying habit I've developed. "I have a really good feeling about you, Clarisse. What I love is that we're both young, ambitious, and determined. I already feel your energy."

A smile beams on her face. I've fed her exactly what she wanted to hear. Under that confidence-oozing power suit is a fine layer of insecurity.

"I'd really like to work with you." I have no choice. That's the truth.

Still beaming, she claps her hands together. "The feeling is mutual. We can sign a contract right now... "

I mentally do a happy dance. I have an agent!

“... Unless you want to show it to your attorney. It’s pretty standard... I get a fifteen percent commission on all deals.”

“Let’s go for it.” There’s no way I can afford a \$750/hour lawyer. For a second, I think about sending it to Logan, who might be able to provide some legal insight, but I decide against it. The less I have to do with him, the better.

She calls out to Mario. “Mario, darling, print me out a contract. Then, break out the champagne... and come join me and our *new* client. Sloan White... aka S.L. Whitman.”

Ten angsty, life-changing minutes later, after I’ve read, signed, and dated the contract, three clinking crystal flutes ping like wind chimes.

Black Lies is one step closer to being published.

And I’m one step closer to being found out for what I really am. One four-letter F-word: F-A-K-E.

A fake.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I spend the next few weeks polishing my manuscript with Clarisse and Mario. I really love Mario's input. He's added some snark to my text. A few laugh-out-loud lines. Barbara, who I never heard laugh once, had no sense of humor. Not one funny bone in her entire body. I don't think Clarisse has one either.

By the end of January, the book is ready to be sent out to publishers.

Every day I stay glued to my computer, waiting to hear if Clarisse has gotten interest in the book. Some days, I barely leave it. It's not like I have something better to do, though I should be looking for a job. Plan B should I not get a publication offer.

It's now February first, and so far, nada. Rejection after rejection. None of the Big Five publishers are biting. No one is interested in taking a chance on a brand-new author. No matter how good the book is. Maybe I should have told Clarisse that I was Barbara Van Wyck's long-lost daughter, following in her footsteps the way Carol Higgins did with her late bestselling mother, Mary Higgins Clark. It's too late now and I'm sure that would have opened a can of worms. The least not being, Detective McGrath. No suspect has been arrested in connection with Barbara's murder. He or she is still out there. And I'm still number one on the list.

I've not heard from Logan, and Mrs. Cruikshank won't stop hounding me for the past due rent. Now three months' worth. She's threatened to evict me. I fear I will have to move to Florida and live

with my insufferable mother and Cliff. That or I may be Maplewood's first homeless person. I've been googling cat-friendly tents.

Each day I grow more and more despondent. I'm giving up hope, though optimistic Clarisse assures me we're going to get an offer. *Good things happen to those who wait.* It's an ancient Chinese proverb.

On the following Friday, the last one of the month, four life-changing things happen.

I turn thirty.

My cast comes off.

I get an eviction notice...

And I sell my book!

To a small independent publisher—Forcebooks based in Brooklyn—that has a great track record of publishing new authors and turning them into bestsellers. They actually gave me a two-book deal that included an advance. Seventy-five thousand dollars! For someone like me, a fortune.

Ecstatic, I walk to The Village Liquor Store and buy some champagne. Okay, it's more like the cheapest bottle of cava, but the cork pops and it bubbles all the same.

Upon returning to my not-for-long decrepit apartment, I pour myself a glass and do a happy dance with Moo on my shoulder. I drink the entire bottle. Whoo-hoo! So long, Mrs. Cruikshank! I'm moving out!

Somewhere around six o'clock, my intercom buzzes. Weird. I'm not expecting anyone.

"Who's there?" I ask through the speaker. Please don't make it be Detective McGrath. I don't want anyone to rain on my parade.

"Delivery," responds a flat male voice, and I let out a sigh of relief.

A minute later, there's a knock at my door. My heart stutters. Maybe he's some rapist—or murderer!—and I shouldn't have let him up.

Anxiously, I peer through the peephole. It's a pimply, teenage kid, and he's holding a package. Scrawny, he looks pretty nonthreatening and I think I've seen him in town before. Taking no chances, I open the door, keeping the safety chain in place.

“Delivery,” he says again in four monotone syllables. He slips a padded manila envelope through the crack. I’m surprised I don’t have to sign for it. He skirts off and I relock the door.

My name is written in large red block letters on the outside. I carefully tear open the anonymous envelope.

Inside is something wrapped in orange tissue paper. I unfold the paper and gasp.

It’s a silk Hermès scarf. The navy and gold horseshoe and rope pattern identical to the one Barbara was wearing the day she was murdered. Maybe it’s even hers.

A small typewritten note on cream-colored Cartier stock paper accompanies the scarf.

*Congratulationx!
Happy Belated Holidayx!
Enjoy your new Hermèx xscarf!*

Bile rises to my throat. The note was written on Barbara’s typewriter.

Is The Barbarian still alive?

Or is her murderer stalking me?

Or is this some kind of cruel hoax?

With Moo still on my shoulder, I throw up.

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PART 2

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ABOUT A YEAR LATER

SURPRISE! It's me again! I'm still alive and I'm not in jail.

Black Lies hit the *New York Times* bestseller list among others. All three versions: the hardcover book, e-book, and audio book. It was Amazon's most gifted book over Christmas.

As much as I sometimes despise my arrogant know-it-all agent, Clarisse was right about Forcebooks. My editor was spot-on, and their team did an excellent job launching and marketing it. And in record time. If you asked me, the spectacular cover sold the book. I wish you could see it. The title, *Black Lies*, is written in bold red uppercase letters to resemble dripping blood and the "I" looks like a terrifying chef's knife.

Soon after it became a runaway bestseller, offers for foreign rights started pouring in, and it's been sold in thirty-two territories worldwide. A total of three dozen languages. In addition to getting substantial advances, ongoing quarterly royalties have further added to my financial security. According to my accountant, I am set to live securely for the next two years if I live modestly and invest wisely. After that, it's up in the air if I don't publish another bestseller. Yup, *publish or perish*.

You'd think after all this success I'd be a changed person. Much happier. And way more secure. Hardly. I'm not.

I now live in a tiny but charming two-bedroom condo on Manhattan's Upper West Side that I bought with my advances. (My late bean-counter father always said it's better to buy than rent.) I love it. Funnily, it's a Tudor-style building, one of the few in the city, reminiscent of Evergreen. It overlooks Central Park, and I've furnished it with cheap but chic Ikea furniture. I gave all my old furniture, including my childhood desk, away to Goodwill before I moved to Manhattan. Good riddance!

Despite the building's top-notch security with a uniformed doorman posted under the green awning at the entrance twenty-four seven, I live a life of paranoia. That someone's going to find me out. Arrest me.

For stealing Barbara the Barbarian's book, which might be a misdemeanor.

And/or for escaping New Jersey, which might be a federal crime.

At least, McGrath's been off my back.

The past three months have been exhausting. Following the book's publication in mid-October, I traveled around the country. Doing podcasts. Interviews. And book signings. I've signed so many books I've developed carpal tunnel syndrome and have often had to wear a brace at signing events. An ongoing reminder of that snowy night when I fell and broke my right wrist while attempting to get rid of Barbara's manuscript. A night I'd like to forget.

Now that I'm back in the city, I live in constant fear. Everywhere I look I see Barbara. Hopping into a cab. Marching up Fifth Avenue. Dashing into Bergdorf's. Who knew so many women in Manhattan wear Hermès scarves and black mink coats? I thought furs were banned. And I have yet to see some mink-clad woman get splashed with a can of blood-red paint. So much for animal cruelty activists.

I have no friends, let alone a boyfriend. Like last year, I spent New Year's Eve alone with Moo, but in much nicer digs, and a better bottle of champagne. Though I look the best I've ever looked thanks to barre classes and jogs around the Central Park Reservoir, I'm lonely. I think about Logan a lot and wonder what his life is about. Is he still living in LA? He hasn't contacted me, nor have I tried to contact him. I wonder if he knows if bestseller, *Black Lies* by S.L. Whitman, my pen name, is my book.

All these thoughts whoosh around my brain as I get ready for my first big talk show appearance. My first big gig of the year. Moo, who loves my new apartment, follows me to my black and white tiled bathroom and jumps onto the vanity counter to watch me apply my makeup. I still buy everything at CVS.

I study myself in the mirror. Even with makeup that brings out my wide-set hazel eyes and my new shoulder-length haircut with its trendy copper highlights, I look ordinary. Nothing like the gorgeous, green-eyed blonde who lives in the corner apartment next door to me, Apartment 5C, who always looks effortlessly beautiful and chic. Like she stepped right out of a Ralph Lauren ad.

She looks so familiar to me, but for the life of me I can't place her. Maybe she's a model and I've seen her face splashed across the cover of a magazine or on a subway billboard.

Maybe I should say hi to her. Try to befriend her. It might be nice to have a friend.

But right now, I've got more important things to do.

Sucking in a breath, I grab my bag and hurry out of my apartment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Though the talk show studio is located on West 66th Street near Lincoln Center within walking distance from my apartment, I take a cab. Nervous enough, the last thing I want to do is to run into a Barbara look-alike. Or Barbara herself.

As soon as I arrive, I'm whisked into hair and makeup. I guess they don't like my look. In twenty short minutes, my stylists make me look better than I've ever looked after spending hours on myself. I'm then escorted to something called the "Green Room" where I await my call. I don't know why they call it that because the walls are stark white.

Stay calm, I tell myself. Easier said than done. I'm a hot bundle of nerves. I've never been on national television before. Trying to relax, I take deep breaths and scroll on my phone so I don't pick the cuticles of my manicured nails. I'm reading my latest social media posts, Google Alerts, and Amazon reviews when a gangly production assistant comes to fetch me.

Stage lights blind me. Cameras point at me. Reality hits me. Gah! I'm on a live network talk show. One that everyone watches. Sitting across from the host, Jemma Cooper (no relation to Anderson), I'm nervous as hell. My heart is racing. I try to hide my nerves, clasping my hands on my lap. I shouldn't be so nervous as I was sent the questions beforehand and have prepared my answers. I take a long sip of water before she begins, bracing myself.

After introducing me and my book to viewers—holding the cover up to the camera—Jemma tells me how much she loved *Black Lies*. How she read it in one sitting. Couldn't stop turning the pages. It kept her up all night.

I humbly, nervously thank her.

She reads some reviews.

"A stunning debut! Compulsive and propulsive!"

"A dark, atmospheric thriller! Haunting! I can't stop thinking about this book."

"A masterpiece of suspense. S.L. Whitman may be the new Barbara Van Wyck."

The first two reviews make me tingle, but the last one sends a shiver down my spine.

"Amazing! Congratulations!" Jemma says. Then, she gets straight into the interview. As attractive and personable as she is, she's a no-nonsense kind of person. A professional.

"So, Sloan." She uses my real first name which we agreed to. "What made you write a thriller?"

I chuckle. "Well, someone's got to write them." As if the world needs another thriller. The market is saturated with them. Legal thrillers. Crime thrillers. Vigilante thrillers. Psychological thrillers. Domestic suspense thrillers. Domestic noir thrillers. And the list goes on.

Smiling brightly, the animated host continues. "What inspired *Black Lies*?"

My first lie. I knew this question was coming. "It was inspired by a true-crime podcast I listened to."

She nods. "Interesting. So is the truth stranger than fiction?"

At the moment, what is truth is so elusive to me, but at least I answer honestly. "To be truthful—pun intended—I'm not sure."

She laughs and moves on. "I'm curious... Your protagonist, Helen Trent, is an almost seventy-year-old woman. You're, like, only thirty."

"Almost thirty-one," I correct.

"Whatever. But that's still a huge age gap. How did you get inside her head?"

Starting to relax, I smile. "Actually, it was easy. My late grandma inspired me. We were very close."

Lie number two. I never knew either of my grandmothers. They both died before I was born.

Jemma looks touched and puts her hand to her heart. Next...

"Did you always know you were going to be a writer?"

This question is easy to answer. Because I speak the truth. "Yes, from the day I could hold a pencil." Sadly, my mother never read to me, but I had an inspirational kindergarten teacher. Mrs. Levine. In retrospect, I should have dedicated the book to her instead of my cat, Moo. But then again, Moo earned it. He's been forever loyal and sat by my side the entire time I wrote it.

Stole it.

Jemma asks another question. "What is your favorite line in the book?"

It comes to me quickly because I actually did write it.

My voice is strong and theatrical. "She had the personality of an artichoke, prickly on the outside, with a heart that was hairier than her armpits."

Jemma gasps and clasps her heart. "Oh my God! I loved that line! It's brilliant. So poetic!"

I briefly explain how much poetry has influenced my writing. Either I deserve an Emmy for my performance or a mention in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for lying.

She moves on. "How does it feel to be compared to the late great Barbara Van Wyck?"

I knew this question was coming, so I'm prepared to answer it.

"It's a tremendous compliment. I'm honored and humbled." I flash a smile. "But I'd like to think I have my own unique voice and style."

Lie number three. It's a half-truth. I haven't found my voice. So, maybe it doesn't count as a lie.

"I have time for one more question." Jemma crosses her shapely legs. "Are you working on a new book?"

I bristle. That question wasn't on the list. I bet wily Clarisse snuck it in. She's been hounding me for a new book to fulfill my two-book deal with Forcebooks. To fill her Prada wallet with book money. I've told her over and over she'll be the first to know when I'm ready to share it, not letting on that I've been in author purgatory.

Writer's block. Before I can answer, a red light flashes. A signal.

Jemma: "Time for some viewer questions."

Viewer questions? My heart skips a beat. Or maybe it's totally stopped. Since when was that part of the plan? I will myself to calm down. I'm sure the viewer questions will be innocuous. More than likely complimentary, telling me how much they loved *Black Lies*.

The first call-in question: "Sloan, I didn't read your book, but I love your dress. Where did you get it?"

Jemma and I exchange an off-camera look before she nods, signaling me to answer it.

"T.J. Maxx," I say with a smile.

"Awesome!" says caller number one. "I hope they still have it in my size."

Then, caller number two.

"Tell the world what you did," the husky, androgynous voice draws, as if he or she has a speech impediment.

My breath catches. My stomach clenches. I perceptibly flinch.

"Tell them!" the caller repeats, venom in their voice.

My blood freezes over. Could it be Barbara?

Before I can answer, we go to a commercial break and when we come back, Jemma thanks me for my time.

My time may be up.

Someone knows what I did.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After making a stop in the ladies' room to splash some cold water on my face, I dash out of the building. As soon as I push my way out of the revolving doors, I get a call from my agent, Clarisse.

"You were ahhh-mazing!" she gushes.

I speak my mind, unable to contain my anger. I still feel sick to my stomach. "Why didn't you tell me there would be a live call-in segment at the end?" *And* what about that thrown in question about my next book, though I don't go there.

"Honestly, I didn't know about that."

Seriously?

"Sorry about that." A beat. "I didn't see that part. I had to take a call from another client."

Right. Someone more important than me.

I steel my nerves. Tamper my temper. "Listen, Clarisse, please don't book any more talk shows with call-ins. And I want to pre-approve *all* questions."

"No prob," she singsongs. "And by the way, I'm sorry about the question about your next book."

Ha! A confession. She threw it in. The sneaky snake. She's been pressuring me for *Book 2*, as she refers to it, to the point I don't sleep at night.

I grit my teeth. Pinch my temples. I'm so lost in lies I don't know what's real.

Before she ends the call, she reminds me of my book signing in Maplewood tomorrow. From 2–4 p.m. at The Village Bookstore. I've been suppressing it. Dreading it.

The last thing I want to do is go back there. Face my demons.

"Everything will be set up for you," she assures me. "I'm sending Mario to assist you."

That's a big relief. I adore Mario. He's funny, efficient, and makes me feel relaxed.

"That's great. Thanks!"

"All you have to do is smile and sign."

Assuring Clarisse I will be there, we end the call. My nerves still abuzz, I have two options for calming down (a third, if you count my Xanax): retail therapy—a trip to T.J. Maxx—or a walk through Central Park. I opt for the latter. It's cheaper and more relaxing.

Entering the park at the 72nd Street entrance, I find a bench, sit down, and decompress. I mindlessly watch nannies, cyclists, joggers, and dog walkers pass by. Remnants of the blizzard we had before Christmas dot the grounds, a bitter reminder of the long winter ahead. And to think it's only January 3. The temperature dropping, I hug myself to keep warm.

In an almost Zen-like state, I startle when my phone rings. My mother. Once again, calling at the most inopportune time. Reluctantly, I press answer. We FaceTime.

She tells me she watched me on the talk show. Her loud voice is so grating. So Jersey. Did I—do I?—sound like that? I wonder: You can take the girl out of Jersey, but can you take the Jersey out of the girl?

"Did you read my book?" I ask her.

"Honey, I've been waiting for you to send me a copy." As if she'd really read it. Or spend a cent on it.

I look up at the fading sun and sigh. I can't remember her reading or buying a book in her life. Her and Cliff's favorite pastime is roaming through Costco at lunchtime and grazing on free samples. *Freebies*.

She moves the conversation on. Away from my interview. Away from my book.

"You look like you've lost weight."

"A little bit," I tell her. Actually, a significant bit. Five pounds on my diminutive five-foot-three frame. I've discovered lies burn calories. Sometimes I think my next book will be a self-help book. *Lie and Lose Pounds*. Or *The Liar's Way to Lose Weight*.

I feel an instant bestseller, but stop brainstorming when my mom drops the subject. "So, has my *famous* daughter met anyone new?"

I roll my eyes. All she cares about is me meeting some guy, settling down, and having babies. Making her and Cliff grandparents.

I refuse to answer her question. "Listen, Mom, I've got to go. My agent is calling me." Yet another lie. I'm totally convinced I'm a serial liar. Is there a group I can join called SLA? Serial Liars Anonymous? There's a name for someone like me. *A fauxiopath*.

After a quick "love you," I end the call. As I exit the park, a woman hastily passes by me. She's wearing a long black mink coat and an Hermès print scarf tied around her head.

My heart skips a beat. Then practically beats out of my chest.

Barbara?

She descends the stairs to the subway before I can find out.

Galloping, I follow her down and almost break my neck. On the packed platform, my eyes dart everywhere. She's nowhere to be found.

Like a ghost, she's disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I'm in the dark, dank subway. Standing on a platform. It's hot and smelly. A train arrives and the doors slide open. Commuters emerge in zombie-like form. Each looking exactly like Barbara in her black mink coat and silk kerchief. "I know what you did!" they chant as they come for me, aiming their razor-sharp gold and black fountain pens at me like daggers.

There's no exit. In a panic, I back up against a graffiti-covered concrete wall. "DIE!" chants the horde of Barbaras moving in on me, trapping me. All at once, they stab their pens into every inch of my being.. I scream in utter agony as blood spurts out like crimson red ink. Then, with a feral grunt, one takes a chomp of my brain. CRUNCH!

As my skull explodes in my ears, my eyes pop open and I jolt. Yet another one of my Barbara nightmares. Definitely inspired by yesterday's subway experience.

Shaking, I glance at my phone on my night table. Shit! It's almost noon. I've overslept. I have to be on the train to Maplewood in forty-five minutes. And getting to Penn Station is no picnic. After my vivid nightmare, taking the subway is the last thing I want to do. But I have no choice because the traffic's insane.

I jump out of bed and get ready in record time. After showering and dressing, I make some coffee and feed Moo. Then I'm out the door.

After yesterday's harrowing events—the anonymous talk show caller who claimed to know what I did—and the woman I saw who was the spitting image of Barbara—I'm in no mood to go to Maplewood. Be it to sign or not to sign. I'm on edge and exhausted. I had a restless night's sleep and my *Night of the Living Dead* nightmare is still playing in my head. I can't tune out all the Barbara zombies shouting, "I know what you did!... DIE!"

Maybe it's time to have my head examined. See a shrink. I read somewhere that ninety-five percent of writers are in therapy. Maybe a professional can help me with my writer's block, paranoia, nightmares, and delusions. While I'm on the train to Jersey, I make a mental note to ask Clarisse if she knows someone. She seems like the type who would.

I arrive in Maplewood a half hour before my scheduled book signing and walk from the train station to The Village Bookstore. It's a short five-minute walk down Maplewood Avenue. The weather like yesterday is brisk, but at least the sun is shining. To me, that's a good sign.

A sense of déjà vu washes over me. While I haven't been back here for nearly a year, it's like I never left. Everything is exactly the same, The Village not yet having taken down its festive, Dickensian Christmas decorations. I pass my old apartment above The Village Dispensary and wonder if old Mrs. Cruikshank will be at the signing. Truthfully, I doubt it because she's too cheap to buy a twenty-five-dollar hardcover book. Or a discounted one on Amazon. An unsettling thought flits through my head. Is she the one who called in and said, "Tell the world what you did?" The voice was close to a croak, unrecognizable yet familiar.

In no time, I reach The Village Bookstore. My jaw drops and my hand flies to my chest as I stand before the storefront window. Last time I was here, the window was filled with a RIP poster for Barbara and all her books. Today, it's filled with a poster featuring *my* face—my publisher's wonderful, airbrushed photo—and the cover of my book, *Black Lies*, beside it.

*LIVE BOOK SIGNING WITH S.L. WHITMAN
MAPLEWOOD'S NEW QUEEN OF SUSPENSE!*

Tuesday, January 4
2 p.m.— 4 p.m.

There's already a long line of people that goes around the block, many holding a hardcover copy of *Black Lies* in their hands for me to sign. A security guard is posted at the front entrance, keeping them in order. Someone spots me, but the guard holds them back and allows me to enter the store without being barraged by fans. At one signing this past summer, I was practically knocked down by a zealous fan and at another, a barroom-like brawl broke out between two women when there was only one last signed copy of the book available.

Thanking the guard and grateful that he's here, I march into the store. Energized and brimming with excitement, leaving all my demons behind. As soon as I step inside, I see a table with dozens of copies of *Black Lies* stacked on it along with a smaller version of the window poster perched on an easel. The thrill escalates. The bookstore owner, Marc, instantly spots me and gives me a kiss on both cheeks. Wearing khakis, a button-down, and a spiffy bow tie, he's still as handsome as I remember in a quirky, bookish way.

"*Bienvenue!* Thank you for coming! It means so much to us! And congratulations on your success! Your book has been flying off the shelves! We can barely keep it in stock."

My heart swells with pride and accomplishment. "I'm so happy to be here. I love this place! It's my favorite bookstore in the world." I flash back to the day after I fractured my wrist, sitting here for hours, researching literary agents. It seems like a cross between only yesterday and last century.

"Is Mario Sanchez here?" I ask, my eyes darting around. He's not one to be late.

"Ah! I forgot to tell you. He had some kind of personal emergency and can't make it."

My heart sinks. I'm sure it's more like Clarisse had some kind of personal emergency. Something in line with him taking one of her Crayola-colored pantsuits to the dry cleaner's because she found an ink spot on it.

Mario is the best part of being represented by Clarisse. I adore him, and when he offered to run my hard-to-keep-up-with Facebook reader group and my Instagram feed, I jumped at the chance. Thanks to Mario's lively and often amusing interactions with my fans, the group has grown to over fifty thousand members and my Instagram following is now almost triple that. If my ardent, inquiring fans knew that I stared at a blank Word doc all day in my tattered PJs and played online word games as a distraction, they'd ghost or cancel me. Mario's posts make it sound like I'm sitting on top of the world, having fun, and plotting away at my next book.

With Mario not being here, I feel a little panicked, but fortunately Marc offers to help me set up.

Fifteen minutes later, thanks to Marc and his staff, I'm sitting on a comfortable folding chair behind a table, my author banner folded over it like a tablecloth. The line to get a book signed goes out the door. Pure adrenaline is fueling me. I recognize some of the Maplewood residents. So far, no sign of Mrs. Cruikshank or Mackenzie's parents. I even wonder if they realize that S.L. Whitman is really me... Sloan White.

The line moves smoothly. Using my trusty black Scripto pen, I sign books, Kindle covers, and bookplates in addition to taking selfies with elated fans. Not all readers have read the hardcover edition; many have read it on e-book devices and/or have listened to the audio version. By three o'clock my right wrist is killing me, and I strap on my black brace. It's the only way I'll make it through the rest of the signing. My doctor's told me I may need surgery, but I try not to think about that.

Then, a familiar voice takes me by surprise.

"Well, well, well, fancy meeting you here."

It's Detective McGrath. I haven't seen him in ages, and as far as I know, Barbara's murder is now a cold case. My eyes meet his and look him over.

He hasn't changed a day. Same old pockmarked face. Same old trench coat. Same old beer belly.

I give a nervous half-smile. "Detective, I'm surprised to see you here."

He's holding a copy of my book.

"My wife would have been here, but she came down with a stomach bug. She loved your book." He hands it to me.

Taking it from him and opening it on the table to the page where I generally sign, I ask him her name.

"Maureen."

"A beautiful name." I think for a moment what to write and then pen:

Maureen~

Thank you so much for reading Black
Lies. Your support means a lot to me!

~S.L. Whitman

I admire my scrolly signature. I've perfected it.

Collecting the signed book, he thanks me and eyes my braced wrist.

"Be careful. It's slippery out there."

The same words he left me with before.

I glance out the storefront windows. It's begun to rain.

A chill skates down my spine.

Does he still suspect me of Barbara's murder? I wonder as he lumbers off.

It's almost four o'clock and the line, though diminished, is still ten-people deep. In addition to my wrist, my mouth hurts from smiling.

Ready to pack things up, go home to poor Moo, another familiar voice seeps into my ears.

I jolt.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Logan!

My mouth agape, I look up and meet his sparkling sage green eyes. He's more handsome than ever, dressed in an elegant navy peacoat over a bespoke suit and tie. In his hand is a copy of my book.

I manage to find my voice. "L-Logan... what are you doing here? I thought you were in California."

"I was. I finished law school there, but all that sunshine wasn't for me. Especially being a ginger. I missed the changing seasons and got a job with a top law firm in New York City."

"You're living in the city?" I ask, not caring that I'm holding up the long line of fans wanting to get their book signed.

"No, I'm still living here in Bloomfield with my aunt. It's a lot cheaper."

I glance at the wall clock. It's almost four. "You're home early from work."

"Actually, I worked from home today. I'm about to go into the city to my office. I left a file there I need to review."

"How did you know I was S.L. Whitman?"

I hope he didn't see me on that talk show. I feel myself cringing.

"Everyone in the office has been talking about your book. So, I bought and read it in one night. It's terrific! I saw your photo on the back flap of the cover and recognized you immediately... even with

your new hairdo.” He gives me a crooked smile, the one I love. “It looks good on you.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. I feel myself blushing.

“Thanks,” I say, my voice small, fighting the tingling sensation I feel at the sight of him.

An annoyed woman behind him pokes her head out around him. I recognize her. It’s the woman whose chubby son poked his tongue out at me at The Village Coffee Shop—that fateful day I was there to pick up Barbara’s replacement espressos. She wrinkles her nose and harrumphs.

“Um, excuse me. I’ve been waiting in line for twenty minutes and have to pick my kid up from school. Would you mind having this conversation later?”

I flush with embarrassment while Logan again flashes that adorable lopsided grin. “So, I guess you better sign my book before one of us gets booted.”

Or pummeled by her ginormous bag.

He hands me the book, and I open it to the page I normally sign on, opposite the title page. With my Scripto in hand, I ask him what he’d like me to write.

His grin grows sheepish. “Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

Stunned, I gaze up at him. His eyes never leave me.

“Well?”

“O-okay.” I hand him back the book, only having signed my name. The signature wobbly because my hand was shaking. Hormones robbing me of my composure.

“Same cell number?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes.”

“I’ll text you from the city. Let’s figure around seven thirty.”

I GET BACK to my apartment a little after six. On the cab ride from Penn Station, I got a text from Logan, telling me to meet him at an Ethiopian restaurant in Hell’s Kitchen. It’s located on 9th Avenue and 45th Street. For sure I’m going to take a cab there. While faster,

taking the subway is out of the question. Given my high level of excitement and anxiety, chances are I'll fall down the flight of stairs or even worse, fall onto the tracks with an oncoming train. I don't have a lot of time to get ready. After feeding Moo—the can's hard to open with my achy braced right hand—I hop into the shower and change. Logan will likely still be in a suit and tie, so I decide I should look nice. I put on a pretty wrap dress I bought on sale at Zara and a pair of black pumps. Then, pop two Advil and leave my brace off even though my wrist is killing me. Hopefully, the ibuprofen will do its trick. After a final look in the mirror, pleased with both my blown-dry hair and light makeup, I grab my coat and scarf and head to the elevator.

And there she is. Lolling in front of the glistening elevator doors, scrolling through her iPhone with a long slender, manicured finger. The gorgeous blonde from apartment 5C. She's stunningly dressed in a belted camel hair coat that grazes her calves along with spiky black leather ankle boots and matching black leather gloves. A monstrous orange leather bag with the label, Hermès, is draped over one arm. Everything looks Madison-Avenue expensive. Never looking up from her phone, she doesn't acknowledge me. Next to the effortlessly put together beauty, I look and feel like a shlub. The elevator arrives, the door pings open, and she strides inside, leaving me behind. The doors almost close on me as I scurry into the small carriage. I'm instantly engulfed in a cloud of her musky perfume. I recognize it instantly. It smells like Barbara's. My eyes stay trained on her, and suddenly I remember why she looks so familiar to me. It's her pouty blood-red lips. That and her oversized orange designer bag. She was carrying it... the day Barbara was murdered... the day I saw her hurrying out of The Village Coffee Shop. What was she doing in Maplewood I wonder as the elevator descends?

Facing forward, she shows no sign of recognizing me. It's like I'm invisible. Before I can work up the courage to talk to her, the elevator reaches the lobby and she dashes out, swanning to the front door, me trailing her in my three-inch high heels. Outside, the doorman easily hails her a cab. I have to wait twenty long minutes for the next one. All I can think about is what she was doing in Maplewood on the day of Barbara's murder? And what are the chances of me living in

the same Manhattan building as her, right next door? Is it just a coincidence? Or more than a coincidence?

A cab finally comes and I hop inside.

Still thinking about the mysterious Girl in Apartment 5C as I look out the passenger window, my phone pings with a text. My mind stops wandering and my heartbeat quickens. Is Logan canceling on me?

Anxiously, I glance down at the message. It's from an unknown number. My heart leaps to my throat.

It should have been me signing books.

Another unknown number text comes in. Unsure if it's from the same sender, I dare to open it.

You took away what was mine.

I suddenly have no appetite. And fight the urge to tell the driver to turn around. To go back to my apartment, throw up, and then hide under my covers.

Someone knows what I did. *And* they're out to get me.

A chilling thought swoops into my head. Could it be The Girl in Apartment 5C?

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CHAPTER THIRTY

I'm a nervous wreck when I step inside the restaurant. Low lit, it's small and funky. The ethnically diverse diners are young and artsy. At least, it's not the kind of restaurant where you might encounter a Barbara look-alike in a mink coat. Or The Girl in Apartment 5C.

The walls are painted a canary yellow and are decorated with colorful East African paintings, giving the restaurant a combined feeling of an art gallery and cozy eating place. Votive candles sit on the square, mostly two-seat shiny teak wood tables. Maybe two dozen in total. A tantalizing blend of exotic spices wafts up my nose as a soft, rhythmic blend of strings and drums plays in my ears.

I spot Logan right away. He waves, gesturing me over to his table. It's in the back corner.

My nerves frayed, I stagger his way. Luckily, I don't bump into a waiter and knock over a tray.

The true gentleman he is, he stands and pulls out the chair across from him. He helps me take off my coat and drapes it over the back.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I stammer, sitting down on the batik cushion as gracefully as I can.

He returns to his chair and smiles. "No apologies. You're exactly on time. I got here early." He stares at me. "You seem frazzled."

"I am. You know with the book signing and everything." I'm for sure not going to share my menacing texts with him. I shove them to the back of my mind.

“Well, you’re in luck. I already ordered *t’ej*.”

I glance down at the corked beakers. I tell Logan they remind me of those beakers we used in high school chemistry. Logan was my lab partner. We almost blew up the classroom. The chemistry between was greater than the two unknown substances we mixed for our final exam.

Reminiscing, Logan laughs. “Mr. Little, our teacher, was such a dick. I bet his wife called him that too.”

“A dick?”

“No, Mr. Little.”

I can’t help laughing as Logan continues.

“*T’ej* is a honey wine favored by Ethiopian kings. Drink it straight from the beaker,” he says, uncorking his and putting the glass rim to his lips.

I follow suit and take a hesitant sip.

“What do you think?” he asks as I guzzle it.

“Wow! It’s really good!” It is! Almost like liquid candy.

“Glad you like it!” Grinning, he takes another sip of his. “Have you ever eaten Ethiopian food?”

I shake my head. “I can’t say that I have.” While my apartment is virtually down the street from Harlem where African restaurants abound, I’ve never ventured up there by myself and eaten at one.

“Then, you’re in for a treat. I ordered the sampler. You’re going to love it.”

“Did you discover Ethiopian food while you were in the Peace Corps?”

Taking another sip of his honey wine, he nods. “I was hooked on it from the minute I tried it. Love at first bite.”

He makes me giggle and tells me more about his time in Africa with the Peace Corps.

I listen intently, then change the subject. “So, what law firm are you working for?”

“A big one on Park Avenue. Straub Holloway.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

He laughs. “You wouldn’t unless you were a lawyer.”

“Do you like it?”

He shrugs. "It's okay... if you like reading contracts and billing hours."

"What kind of law do you practice?"

"IP... intellectual property law."

I nod, remembering he mentioned he was interested in that area of law before he left for Los Angeles.

"What does that entail?"

"All kinds of stuff... copyright infringement, trademarks, patents, and more. Right now, I'm working with one of our big publishing clients on a lawsuit involving possible plagiarism."

I gulp more of my wine. My stomach bunches. "Is plagiarism a crime?"

"No, it's not considered a crime. A plagiarist can't go to prison... well, unless he or she killed the author..."

I swallow so hard I think the whole restaurant has heard me. Logan goes on.

"... but a plagiarist could get sued and ruin their career forever." He sets down his wine. "Enough about me. Let's talk about you."

Let's not. My stomach is roiling. My mouth is dry despite the wine.

"So, how does it feel to be on the road to fame and fortune?"

I let out a nervous chortle. "It's more like the road to nowhere."

Logan's brows lift. "What do you mean? You're a freaking bestseller!"

My shoulders sag. "I may be a one-book wonder. I'm under contract to write another book, but it's not coming to me. Half my days, I sit in front of my laptop waiting for words to magically appear. Sadly, books don't write themselves."

"Writer's block?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what it is."

There's another name for what I have. Imposter syndrome. A debilitating condition where a person, like yours truly, feels like a fraud or phony and doubts their abilities. As much as I long to open up to Logan, I can't. It would be worse than opening a can of worms.

Thank goodness a tall, lanky waiter, clad in a colorful tunic over loose linen pants, brings us our order. He sets a large platter on the table.

While I have no clue what all these dishes are, it all looks and smells amazing. I inhale the fragrant aroma as Logan explains what everything is. Tibs wot (beef)... Doro wot (chicken) ... Misir wot (lentils)... and the what's "wot" list of sautéed meat and vegetarian dishes goes on.

"Dig in," Logan says.

I glance down and realize I don't have a place setting. Nor does he. "Logan, I need the waiter to bring me a knife and fork."

He laughs. "You don't need them. You eat this food with your hands."

I laugh back. "Well, I'm glad I didn't wear my wrist brace!"

We're both laughing when another bottle of Ethiopian wine arrives, this time a delicious rosé. After a toast to me and the success of *Black Lies*, Logan and I dig in with our hands, intermittently feeding ourselves and each other the various, scrumptious, spiced dishes.

"Oh my God," I moan. "This is all so good."

Then Logan does something that makes me want to jump out of my skin. He takes my right hand and licks my saucy fingers. The thing is, I let him, and I have never realized how sensitive they are. Like there are invisible threads attached from my fingertips to my core.

Still licking, his sparkling sage green eyes burn into mine. "And *this* is so good."

We dine, laugh, and talk for about two hours. After some Ethiopian coffee and a shared scoop of refreshing mango ice cream, Logan pays the bill.

"Thanks so much," I say, pushing my chair away from the table and standing. He quickly rounds the table and helps me with my coat.

"Where do you live?" he asks.

"On the Upper West Side. Central Park West and 96th Street."

"Are you up for a walk?"

"Sure." I'd do anything to keep this man in my life longer. I don't want this evening to end.

We walk up lively Amsterdam, arm in arm, cutting across 86th Street to CPW, chatting about everything and anything that comes to

mind. Everything except my secret and threats. In fact, I forget about them...

Until a tall woman in a long black mink coat and Hermès scarf breezes out of her building. She's walking a colossal cropped-ear Doberman that's as black as her coat. The dog pulls her toward me and growls, his mouth foaming, displaying his razor-sharp canines. His hackles rise and resemble the teeth of a chainsaw.

The woman, who, thank God, isn't Barbara, reins him in and admonishes him. "Bad boy, Attila!" Then apologizes to me. "I'm sorry. My fur baby is still in training."

In training to become an attack dog? And who the heck names their dog Attila, after Attila the Hun? A barbarian!

A chilling thought. Someone like Barbara. *Barbara the Barbarian.*

Led by Attila, she walks briskly down the street.

"Are you okay?" asks a concerned Logan.

"Y-yeah," I say shakily. "I'm afraid of those kinds of dogs."

And women.

"Stay closer to me." He wraps his arm around me and draws me against him.

It feels good. So good. I instantly calm down.

A short ten minutes later, we're at my building. He walks me past the doorman to my apartment door.

"Thanks again for dinner," I say, sad that the evening is coming to an end. I fumble for my keys and jam them into the deadbolt. Unlocked, I open the door an inch. "It was really fun."

"Yeah, it was."

His eyes grow lidded. He tips up my chin with his thumb. "Sloan, I've missed you."

His left hand is pressed against the door. He glances at his watch. "And I've missed my train." Frowning, he lets go of me. "Guess I'd better go and find a hotel."

I tug at his scarf. A painful ache shoots from my throat to my groin. One of longing and desire. "You don't have to."

Wordlessly, he reads my mind. *Stay.* On my next heated breath, he presses his lips against mine and pushes the door open. My eyes are squeezed shut as he somehow leads me to my bedroom,

walking me backward. With our mouths hungrily locked, we tumble into my bed in a mad tangle, and in a heated frenzy disrobe.

Overcome with desire, we can't get enough of each other. Until we're so spent we fall asleep curled together in a love knot.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Moo's loud meow awakens me. He's not on the bed. Maybe he's repulsed by the smell of sex or is miffed I slept with someone else last night. Since moving into the city, he's become obsessively possessive. My eyes still glued shut, I reach for the other side of the double bed and feel nothing but a squishy pillow. My eyes pop open. Logan's gone! And so are his clothes.

The strong smell of coffee wafts up my nose. Maybe he's in the kitchen. Rolling out of bed, I grab my robe from my closet and shrug it on. It's weird that I don't want him to see me naked in broad daylight. I was so comfortable rolling around, bared to him all night long because the darkness masked all my imperfections. And I have to admit I was a little drunk from all that Ethiopian wine.

Moo follows me to the kitchen. Logan's not there either, but on the counter by the coffee maker there's a note. I scurry over and read it.

Thanks for the best night ever. I loved every single moment. Early meeting. I'll text you later. Be free for dinner tonight and don't dress up. xL

A smile lifts my lips. Any insecurity I had evaporates. I felt the same way. It was the best night in my life too. While I'm not a virgin, it was the best sex I've ever had. Several times he took me to the moon and back. His kiss was a prelude to his skill as a lover.

My skin prickling, I feed Moo and then pour myself some coffee, using the mug he gave me two Christmases ago. After he broke my heart when he left for California, I almost gave it away, but in the end, I couldn't part with it. Maybe it's what brought him back to me.

Giddy with happiness, I pirouette back to my room. I feel renewed. Inspired. I can feel the words coming.

Before I open a blank Word document, I check my emails. There are several from my agent which I ignore and over a dozen from fans. I click open the newest one. From someone whose address is je.sais@gmail.com. Sent at 5:05 a.m. Three hours ago.

Subject: The Eighth Commandment

My eyes grow wide as I read the email. I set my coffee down before it spills on my keyboard.

*Thou shalt not steal.
Rot in hell, sinner.*

Sweat beads on my chest. I feel sick to my stomach.
I sprint to the toilet and throw up in the bowl.
Every remaining bit of what's *wot* swims in the water as I flush.
Someone wants to destroy me!
Do they want me dead?

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

After retching, I hardly feel better. I'm still nauseated. And I'm in a panic.

Who is doing this to me? And why? They must have gotten my email address from my website or the backmatter of *Black Lies*.

I stagger back to my bedroom and check all my socials on my phone. My fingers are trembling.

Have I been reduced to a hashtag? Am I trending? Has the accusation of stealing Barbara's book gone viral? Does the whole world know that I'm a book thief? A fraud?

I inhale a deep, shaky breath. Thank God, not yet, but my unearthing could happen any time. I pop a Xanax.

Barbaragate. That's what the media will call it when all hell breaks loose.

I need to get out of my apartment. Clear my head.

I change into my jogging clothes. Red sweatpants and a matching hoodie, last year's hideous birthday gift from my mother, and my worn Adidas.

I enter Central Park at 86th Street and make my way to the reservoir. After a quick calf stretch, I begin my jog around the 1.6-mile circumference, starting off slowly until I get into a rhythm and pick up my pace, breathing heavily. I've never been a great runner, one of the reasons team sports eluded me both in high school and college. My shortish legs have never helped.

The weather is overcast which does nothing to help my mood. I can't shake my fear. My overwhelming sense of paranoia.

I'm so paranoid I feel like someone is following me. I look over my shoulder expecting to see Barbara in her mink coat and Hermès scarf, holding a giant knife in her hand. She always said publishing is a cutthroat business, but maybe she meant it literally.

And there *she* is.

About twenty feet behind me.

The Girl in Apartment 5C!

Has she been following me? I'm growing more and more convinced that she wants to bring me down. Is she some kind of publishing spy? A private detective? A deranged fan? Someone who has a connection to Barbara?

As always, she looks totally put together. Dressed in a white hoodie and matching stylish joggers. Probably Lululemon or Alo. Along with a stylish baseball cap and brand-new, top-of-the-line running shoes. I notice the words *La Sorbonne/Paris* emblazoned on the front of her hooded sweatshirt.

With her long, slender toned legs and her chic running clothes, she looks like a French runway model while I look like a Teletubby. The red one. Was her name Po? Or was it Dipsy?

The distance between us shrinks. As she overtakes me, she purses her scarlet lips (Sheesh! She's even wearing lipstick!) and shoots me a scathing look.

"Get out of my way!" she shouts.

The very words she uttered when I encountered her in Maplewood, barging out of The Village Coffee Shop. I almost stop dead in my tracks. There's something sinister in her tone. Something more to the meaning of her words. I can't stop thinking she's after me and knows I stole Barbara's book. But what I can't understand is her motive for wanting to expose me. What does she have to gain?

As I circle the reservoir, I lose sight of her. She evaporates from my mind and I focus on my run. My lungs and limbs burning, I complete one lap and exit where I entered.

Breathing heavily, I do some lunges and stretch my calves against a bicycle rack. The couple next to me is talking in French. And a thought hits me like a brick. Or should I say *brique*?

Whoever sent me the threatening email this morning used the address je.sais@gmail.com. I took French in high school and know what *je sais* means.

Translation: *I know*.

As in, I know what you did.

A very real possibility takes hold of me...

Was it the girl in the Sorbonne sweatshirt?

The Girl in Apartment 5C.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I hurry home and bang out an email to je.sais@gmail.com. Telling the recipient I know what they're up to and to stop sending me threats. Warning them I will go to the police if I have to. At the end, I add a P.S:

BTW, I know you live in the apartment next door.

Without reading it over, I hit send. Before I can blink, I get a message back from Google, saying that the email address can't be found. It can only mean one thing. She's onto me and deleted her account.

I spend the rest of my day glued to my phone waiting for my secret to explode on social media. Go viral. To see my name reduced to a hashtag. Intermittently, I go to my laptop to write some words. With my crippling anxiety, I'm more blocked than ever.

No words come. I end up playing Wordle and lose.

Maybe I should turn myself in. Come clean and commit career suicide. Some people fail up, but that wouldn't be me. I'll fall down a rabbit hole I can never get up from. And probably smash my head and break a few bones.

I'm so distraught that when I hear the intercom buzz I leap up from my desk and bang my knee.

It's Logan! Gah! I thought he was going to text me. I wish he had because I would have texted back him back saying I couldn't have

dinner with him.

I'm in no mood to see him.

Plus, I'm still in my running clothes and probably stink.

And there's no time to shower or change.

Having no choice, I tell the doorman to let him up.

My doorbell rings and I gimp over to the door, narrowly avoiding tripping over Moo.

Hesitantly, I unlock it and swing the door open. Towering over me, Logan shoots me that lopsided smile that usually makes me swoon, but tonight it doesn't. In one hand is a bouquet of colorful bodega-bought flowers and in the other, a large brown paper bag. Something delicious wafts in the air, but despite not eating all day, I don't have much of an appetite.

"Hi," he says brightly. "I brought over some Chinese food. Hope you don't mind. I've always felt bad about that Chinese dinner we had when you were living in Maplewood."

"Th-thanks." My voice glum, I don't bother asking him why he didn't text.

His eyes skim my shabby sweats as he accompanies me into my apartment. A wave of embarrassment washes over me.

"Sorry about the way I look. I've been working all day."

"Writing?"

"Yes." Tonight's first lie if you don't count the email I wrote.

"Good for you! That's awesome!" He looks me over. "And by the way, I think you look adorable, my little bestselling writer."

"Thanks." If he only knew.

After putting the flowers in a vase, we're sitting cross-legged on the floor around my coffee table. The cartons of Chinese food are laid out on the glass top along with two Sapporo beers, a couple of plates, and bamboo chopsticks. Logan, who's taken off his jacket and tie, ladles out generous portions of all the piping hot dishes, exactly the same as before. He's also put the two fortune cookies on the table.

"So, how was your day?" I begin, forcing myself to make conversation.

He shrugs. "Same old, same old. More contracts to review and hours to bill."

I take several sips of my beer, then twirl my lo mein noodles with my chopsticks. "You don't sound like you love practicing law."

Logan knocks down a gulp of his beer. His expression darkens. "Honestly, I hate it. I wish I could be writing a novel like you."

"Trust me, you don't."

"You're so lucky you won the Stratemeyer Scholarship."

The creative writing grant that gave me a full ride to Hampshire College. I felt lucky then in high school. But it got me nowhere except an acceptance to an exorbitantly expensive grad school program that I'm still paying off and a lowly assistant job with Barbara the Barbarian that I may always regret.

Absentmindedly, I pick up a fortune cookie and rip off the cellophane.

Logan eyes me. "Hey, you should eat something first. Save that for last."

It's too late. I've snapped it open and read the fortune.

She who lies dies in truth.

At this cryptically ominous message that seems meant for me, the tears I've been holding back all day spill out of my eyes.

Logan sets his Sapporo down. "Sheesh, Sloan. What's wrong?"

Everything. My life is a sham. And it may be short-lived.

"I don't know," I sniff. "It's been a long day."

He holds me in his gaze. "What's really going on?"

Loosened up by the beer, the words tumble out. "Logan, someone's been stalking me."

He furrows his rust-colored brows. "What do you mean?"

"Like sending me threatening emails and texts." I leave out the part about someone knowing I've stolen Barbara's book. That would end my career *and* my relationship.

"Can you show them to me?"

"I deleted them." Another lie. The more I lie, the easier it gets.

His lawyer face grows pensive. "You know what I think?"

I shake my head. "No, what?"

"You've got a troll."

“A troll?” My mind flashes to those creepy little dolls with the cotton candy hair that my mother once gave me at Christmas. They creeped me out so much I sold them at a garage sale.

Logan explains. He works with a lot of authors and publishers, and it's not uncommon. It comes with the territory. The more successful you are, the more you have. They're jealous, sadistic individuals who live to bring you down. Some are even fellow authors who review bomb you. Giving your books one-star, scathing reviews, often recruiting click farms to join in the macabre fun.

“That's awful,” I lament. “What should I do?”

“Forget about it and let me bend you over your desk...”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The rest of the month sails by smoothly. If you don't count my writer's block. My troll seems to have disappeared, and I've not seen The Girl in Apartment 5C, who, for all I know, may be my troll and has gotten bored with stalking me. I do a few local bookstore signings, have an interview with the *New York Times*, and convince both my agent, Clarisse, and my editor, Ainsley, that my second book is coming along nicely. Both want to see pages. I placate them by telling them I'd prefer to send them the complete, edited manuscript. They have no choice but to wait. Sales of *Black Lies* are still going strong. Now going into its third printing and hovering on various bestseller lists. A paperback is coming out soon which will further boost visibility and sales. The best news of all... Greta Gerwig has agreed to direct the movie, with her husband, Noah Baumbach, helming the screenplay. I would have loved to have written the screenplay, but it wasn't an option. If you want Greta, you get Noah.

On the home front, things couldn't be better. I'm in love. And Logan's moved in. We're almost like an old married couple except we're not married. Mostly we stay home. Ordering in takeout food and watching Netflix.

It's weird I've never met any of Logan's friends or colleagues. He tells me that he doesn't have friends and that his fellow lawyers are all a bunch of boring workaholics. It's not like I have friends or close colleagues to socialize with either, well except for Mario, who I don't want to share with anyone; he's the closest thing to a girlfriend I've

had since high school. I can't imagine spending a night with Clarisse and hearing her wax lyrical about all her clients. Or my preppy-to-a-fault Forcebooks editor, Ainsley Dearson, who's got as much personality as a head of iceberg lettuce.

On the third Friday of the month, Logan tells me he has a surprise for me. We're going to the New York Public Library for a special event. More specifically, to neighboring Bryant Park. No matter how much I beg, he won't tell me what it is.

For January, it's unseasonably mild. We don't even need hats or gloves. When we get there, a big screen and cameras are set up. Is it some kind of concert or special screening?

"Logan, what's going on?" I ask, perplexed.

He takes both my hands in his and stares me in the eye. "Sloan, I've always loved you."

"You have?" My mind flashes back almost fifteen years. To that life-changing day. That time I found him... As fast as that memory flashes into my head, I banish it. Let bygones be bygones. Actions speak louder than words, and Logan has been the most attentive, faithful, and loving boyfriend a girl could ever ask for. Sometimes, I can't believe he's mine.

"Yeah, I have," Logan says.

"The same," I say softly. And that's the truth. The honest truth.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as Logan gets down on one knee. My eyes never leave him as he pulls out a small red velvet box from his breast pocket. And I suddenly realize we're on the big screen and everyone in the park and adjacent eateries can hear and see us. I heat with a mixture of embarrassment, anticipation, and unbridled passion. My heart beats a thousand times a minute.

"Marry me, Sloan White." He flips open the little box and slips out a ring. It's the biggest tiny diamond I've ever seen. And the brightest. The multi-faceted stone sparkles like a rare star in the Manhattan sky.

"Well?" he says, looking up at me expectantly with such deep longing it moves me. "Will you?"

Emotion overwhelms me. Tears spring to my eyes. My mouth is dry. I have no words. And then finally, "Yes. A million times yes!"

Though we've been a couple for only a month—not even—I've known him forever and have never felt surer about anything in my life.

Sloan White has awoken from her deep sleep and gotten her prince.

From everywhere, loud cheers and applause erupt.

He slips the ring on my finger and then stands and dips me in his arms, giving me a movie-star kiss that obliterates everything.

The untimely call from my mother.

And the ping of the text I discover on my phone when we get home.

You stole my life.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

One week later, on the last Friday in January, we get married in a civil ceremony at busy City Hall. Waiting for hours to exchange our vows and get a certificate. There are no friends or family members present. Logan's one living relative, his aunt, is too frail to travel, and my mom and Cliff missed their flight from Jacksonville due to bad weather, but texted me they'd be here for the dinner party. The one my agent, Clarisse, is hosting at Tavern on the Green in Central Park.

The ceremony takes all of fifteen minutes. Logan and I exchange wedding vows that we've handwritten on index cards while the nerdy art school photographer we hired snaps pictures and films us with his iPhone. In addition to pledging our eternal love, we declare that whatever is mine is his and his, mine. *Until death do us part*. We have no prenup.

Me in an ivory knockoff Chanel suit that I found on sale and Logan in an elegant charcoal suit and tie, we dash from downtown City Hall to the legendary restaurant. The rush-hour traffic is horrendous. We narrowly make it there in time. After checking our coats, the hostess escorts us to our table. We are led through the bustling bar area with its vaulted beamed ceiling and massive wrought-iron chandelier, that eerily reminds me of the one in Evergreen, Barbara's Tudor-style mansion, to an airy glass pavilion lit by crystal chandeliers and overlooking the snow-covered park. It's magical. Like a fairy land.

Our table for eight is set with sparkling cutlery, china, and glasses—crystal flutes as well as goblets for wine and water. In the middle is a stunning centerpiece of soaring white flowers.

Clarisse, dressed in a chic winter-white pantsuit, and her assistant Mario, dressed in a flamboyant red jumpsuit, are already there, as are my editor, Ainsley Dearson, and her boss, Oliver Force, the CEO and founder of Forcebooks. Everyone's scrolling on their phones. Except for Oliver, they stop and put them away when we arrive at the table. I introduce Logan, and we take our assigned seats.

Not waiting for my parents, who are on their way, a bottle of champagne is opened and Clarisse makes a toast. My publisher looks up briefly from his phone to clink his glass, then goes back to scrolling. I'm happy not to have to make conversation with him because the only thing he'll want to talk about is my next book and when it'll be done.

After a few sips of champagne and light conversation, my parents show up.

I'm mortified.

They're clad in matching Hawaiian shirts and khakis. My mother's hair is now styled in a blond bouffant and Cliff is sporting a dyed orange comb-over. Both look like they've got sprayed-on tans and have put on ten pounds. The buttons on Cliff's shirt are about to pop.

"Hi, honey!" my mother says buoyantly, her New Jersey accent thicker than molasses. She gives me a hug that almost crushes me. Then she hugs Logan. "Logan, sweetheart, congratulations! I never thought in a million years you'd be the one for my little girl."

That's because you never liked him. I inwardly cringe as Cliff bellows, "Welcome to the family, boy."

Dying of embarrassment, I force myself to introduce my parents and tell them to take their seats. A server comes by and pours them some champagne.

My stepfather looks up at him. "Hey, man, can I get a Bud and an order of sliders?"

Everyone at the table gives him a look. Even my publisher. I want to crawl under the table.

My mother takes a gulp of her champagne. "We're famished! They didn't serve us any food on the plane. Not even a bag of pretzels. And on top of that, can you believe they lost our luggage?! Apparently, it'll be here before we fly back tomorrow for Cliffie's bowling tournament. He's in the finals!" My parents' social life is reduced to the three *B*'s: Bingo. Bowling. Bridge. And their once-a-month neighborhood beach excursion.

She beams as does my stepfather. "It's a darn good thing we're staying at a hotel close to *LaGwadia*," he says, fixing his strands of hair.

My mother looks at him. So lovingly I could puke. "*Cliffie*, we should propose a toast."

"Sure thing, *Junie* baby"

Where's the bathroom?

They lift their flutes and everyone joins in.

My mother: "To the new power couple... *Slogan!*"

Oh God! Kill me now.

The dinner goes on. Now on her third glass of champagne, my mother dominates the conversation with her nonstop prattling.

"I am so proud of my daughter. Who knew she had it in her to write a bestseller?"

Maybe, if she'd ever read one of the short stories I wrote in middle school and high school, she'd have an inkling.

"She is a rising star," says Clarisse, her voice saccharine.

"We all love her," gushes Mario, his voice genuine.

"We can't wait for her next book," sniffs my editor, Ainsley. *Hint. Hint.*

My mother takes another slurp of her champagne. The more she drinks, the heavier her Jersey accent gets.

"Thank goodness, she no *lawnga* has to work for that horrible woman. Barbara Van Dyke."

"Van Wyck," I correct, my teeth clenched.

"Wick, dick, whatever." She flicks her wrist dismissively. "My daughter loathed her. She was a slave driver. Sloan told me she hoped the old witch would fall off her broom."

Everyone listens with their ears perked up, their eyes wide.

I want to hide under the table and die.

“I thought she was your inspiration. Your mentor,” says Clarisse, before I can defend myself. Or tell my big-mouth mother to change the subject.

My voice wavers. “Don’t believe everything my mother says. While it’s true Barbara and I had our moments—she was difficult—I only meant what I said figuratively speaking. I idolized her.”

“Did they ever find her killer?” asks wide-eyed Mario, who lives for gossip and loves true crime podcasts.

“To the best of my knowledge, no.”

“Were you ever a suspect?” he asks.

My chest tightens. Thank God, Logan intervenes. “Everyone, this is a wedding celebration. Not a murder investigation.”

As the conversation diverges, my mother taking the lead, my peripheral vision catches sight of someone. A gorgeous lanky, blond woman flanked by two older adults—an elegantly dressed man with salt-and-pepper hair, and a woman wearing head-to-toe *real* Chanel and a wide-brimmed felt hat that obscures her face.

It’s The Girl in Apartment 5C. What is *she* doing here?

Unable to stop myself, I turn my head and her eyes lock with mine. A smirk crosses her lips and then she ignores me. Does she know something I don’t? Lately, she’s been out of sight, out of mind. Now, I again can’t help wondering... could she be my troll?

Logan follows my gaze. He raises his hand as if signaling a hello. A sign of recognition. She flutters her fingers back at him as her smirk morphs into a toothy smile. My stomach churns. Do they know each other? Maybe they’ve run into each other in my apartment building. Maybes spin in my head as she and the two people she’s with are ushered to a table in the corner, her back to us.

Dinner is served, but I’ve lost my appetite. This is supposed to be the happiest day of my life, but it’s not. I just want this evening to end. To go home, curl up in bed with Logan, and make love.

But it only gets worse.

At the coat check, a tall, statuesque woman wearing a black mink coat and Hermès scarf is standing ahead of me. The coat reeks of tobacco and booze just like Barbara’s. Can it be her? Or is all the champagne messing with my head?

The woman checks her coat and pivots. She's wearing black silk pajamas.

She narrows her green, almond-shaped eyes at me.

"It's you again!"

It's *her*!

The woman I almost knocked over outside Central Park.

Her face morphs into Barbara's.

Our honeymoon in The Bahamas can't come soon enough.

I need to get away before I lose my mind.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Our first night together as a married couple is hardly what I'd call marital bliss. Logan seems to have things on his mind and isn't in the mood for sex.

And I have things on my mind too. At the forefront, why did Logan subtly wave to The Girl in Apartment 5C while we were having dinner? And why did she very *unsubtly* smile back at him? On the cab ride home to my apartment—or should I now say *our* apartment—I thought about confronting him, especially since he silently, pensively looked out the window the entire time. Was he thinking about *her*? Is there something going on between them? I can't believe I've been married for less than twenty-four hours and I've turned into the jealous, suspicious wife.

And there are other things that haunt me and keep me up all night while Logan falls fast asleep. But mainly one. *Barbara*. Why does she seem more alive to me now though she's dead? The fear of being found out as a fraud—for having stolen her manuscript—gnaws at me more than ever.

I'm in the middle of having another one of my nightmares—in this one, being arrested by Detective McGrath, who now heads up a special unit, *The Book Police*, and thrown into something called "plagiarism prison" where I must handwrite until my hand falls off: *I, Sloan White, shall not steal*.

My limp, aching hand is dangling from my wrist by a thread, when Logan wakes me up from my dream.

"Baby, I have bad news..."

My eyes pop open and I bolt to a sitting position. My heart races. Did something happen to my parents? Did someone uncover my deceit? Is it all over the Internet? Was my dream a premonition and The Book Police are on their way to arrest me?

"What?" I gulp, staring at my pajama-clad husband.

"We can't go on our honeymoon."

"What do you mean?"

He sits down on the edge of the bed. "There's a Category 5 hurricane raging in The Bahamas. The airport is closed and on top of that, our hotel has sustained major damage and will likely be closed for renovations for months."

"Oh, no," I moan. "I was so looking forward to going away."

My new husband's shoulders sag. "Yeah, me too." He affectionately rubs my bad wrist with his thumb, something he habitually does. "Maybe it's meant to be. My office wasn't keen on me leaving as we've been prepping for a major lawsuit that may rock the publishing world."

My chest tightens. "Can you tell me about it?" *Could it possibly concern me?*

He rakes his other hand through his sleep-mussed hair and shakes his head. "I can't. I'm sworn to secrecy."

I study the tone of his voice and his expression. Unless he's so good at keeping a poker face, neither suggests that the case involves me. I inwardly sigh with relief.

"Well, what should we do?"

A smile blooms on his face. That lopsided one I adore. "Well, my beautiful new wife, I think we should make love... and then I'm going to serve you breakfast in bed."

After a yummy start to the morning and our lives as husband and wife, Logan decides to go to his office on a Saturday to catch up on work, and my day takes a turn for the worse.

Shortly after I load the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher and unpack our suitcases, my phone rings. It's my mother. She starts in before I can even say hi.

"Honey, did you hear? It's all over the news!"

My one-track mind instantly jumps to my worst fear. They've discovered I'm a fraud. My throat constricting, she continues.

"The hurricane! It's ravaging Florida! The Jacksonville airport is shut down. So, Cliffie and I have to stay here at least a day longer."

I inwardly groan. This *is* bad news! I'm stuck with my mother and her dorky husband for another day. Maybe more!

She makes no inquiry about our Caribbean honeymoon plans, though I mentioned it to her a gazillion times. Either her memory is failing or the wrapped-up-in-herself blabbermouth never heard a word. I don't bring it up.

"That's terrible, Mom. Is your house okay?"

"Thank the good Lord, we're inland enough not to be affected by the flooding and winds. But poor Cliffie's bowling tournament got postponed to next Monday. And next week he can't participate because he's having a colonoscopy. He's beside himself!"

My eyes roll. I bet he's pulling out the hairs of his comb-over.

"Well, honey, since I'm stuck here, I thought it might be fun if I came into the city and we had a mother-daughter day. We could go to Marshalls and you can pick out a wedding gift! Wouldn't that be fun?"

Misery is more like it. Though they do say misery loves company.

Reluctantly, I agree to the outing. I tell my mom to come by my apartment around noon. Before I go shopping with her, I need to go to Trader Joe's to stock up on food as Logan and I have virtually nothing to eat, thinking we'd be away in The Bahamas for a week. I tell my mom I'll leave my extra set of apartment keys with the doorman and she can let herself in if I'm not back in time.

While I walked to Trader Joe's on Columbus Avenue and West 92nd Street, I Uber back to my apartment because I'm laden with four heavy bags of groceries. It's amazing how much more food you need to buy with a plus-one.

Our doorman helps me take the bags out of the car and tells me he'll have someone bring them up to the apartment. One of the many perks of living in a doorman building. That and the extra security is definitely worth the extra money. I can't imagine living in a five-story walk-up and having to lug the bags up all those stairs with some

potential knife-wielding mugger behind me. And what about my stalker? *Or* Barbara?

“Thanks, Mike,” I tell our jovial doorman with a smile.

He returns my smile. “Oh, and by the way, I let your mother upstairs to your apartment per your instructions.”

I heave a breath.

She's here.

Except when I step inside my apartment, it's *not* my mother who awaits me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Mrs. Hayes, what are you doing here?”

It’s Evangeline Hayes. The mother of my former best friend, Mackenzie.

Seated on my couch, she looks more frightening than when I encountered her over a year ago at The Village Coffee Shop in Maplewood.

Her now all gray hair is a rat’s nest, her skeletal body is lost under her coat, and her pale blue eyes flicker with madness against her wan complexion.

I think she’s had some kind of psychotic breakdown. It’s further evidenced in her shrill, shuddery voice.

“You took away what was mine.”

The words reverberate in my ears. They’re identical to those in the menacing text I got following my signing at The Village Bookstore back in January.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“*Mackenzie*. My precious daughter. You can never give her back to me.”

“I-it was an accident.”

“It *wasn’t* an accident!” Her expression grows fifty shades darker. “You’re not only a liar. You’re cold-blooded killer!”

Am I? My heart is hammering, but I will myself to stay calm. “Mrs. Hayes, I think it’s best you leave.”

Her eyes narrow at me. Her expression darkens fifty more shades. She looks like a missile ready to launch, but doesn't move a millimeter.

"Mrs. Hayes, I'm afraid I'm going to have to call security if you don't leave."

She slowly rises.

"Thank you. Let me show you to the door."

Shaking, I lead her out of the living room to the foyer. She lumbers behind me. Moo trails us.

"You're not going to get away with what you did," she hisses.

Suddenly, I feel her hands thrust against my back. Before I can take another step, she shoves me with Wonder Woman strength and I tumble onto the floor. Hitting my knees hard. My kneecaps explode with pain. A frightening thought flashes through my head as I try to push myself up to standing: was she the one who followed me to the dumpster that blizzardy Christmas Eve and shoved me against it while I tried to dispose of Barbara's manuscript?

Stumbling to my feet, she shoves me again and I go flying. This time landing on my back. Hitting my head.

Flat on my back and dazed, she mounts me, straddling me. Pinning me to the floor. It's hard to believe how much strength this frail woman has. Rage must be fueling her.

"Let me go!" I plead.

"Shut up!"

Madness flashing in her eyes, she yanks out something from her coat pocket. I gasp. It's a kitchen knife. The eight-inch blade sharp and shiny. She points it at my heart.

"You're going to pay for what you did!"

Again, the very words of my stalker. It was *her* all along! *Not* someone who was stalking me for stealing Barbara's manuscript. I'm more than convinced she's the one who pushed me that fateful day, her murderous actions triggered by our encounter at The Village Coffee Shop.

All part of Evangeline's sick revenge for believing I destroyed her daughter's life.

My breaths shallow, my mind races. I have no choice. The knife or my life. With all the strength I can muster, I push her off me.

She rolls onto the floor. I have a chance to escape. The door to my apartment isn't far.

I struggle to get up. I'm lightheaded and my bruised knees thunder with pain. Hunched over, I place my hands on my thighs (a technique I learned in barre class) and straighten to standing.

But as soon as I get my footing and lunge for the door, she grabs my ankle and pulls me down again.

I land hard again on both knees in a kneeling position and groan in pain. She kicks me in the ribs with her boot and again I find myself flat on the floor on my back. Evangeline on top of me. Gripping the knife, holding it over my heart.

"Sloan White, it's time for you to *die*!" Red with rage, she grits her teeth and grunts as the blade comes down at me. Fear like I've never known consumes every molecule of my being. This is it. My life is over!

I'm paying for what I did.

Suddenly, she lets out an ear-piercing scream.

It's Moo! He's leapt onto my assailant's head. With an ear-piercing meow, he tears at her face with his retractable claws.

Evangeline shrieks in agony. "Get this beast off of me!"

But Moo is relentless and goes at her, like she's a scratching pad. As she lets go of the knife, I try to pull him off, but his nails are stuck into her skin and scalp like they're hammered in.

His prey rolls over onto her back, but Moo clings to her, still clawing her. As she writhes and wails, her face an ugly patchwork of bloody red scratches, I grab the knife and fling it across the room out of her reach.

"Get him off me," she shrieks again as I weigh my options.

I can't let the psycho get away. Or get away with what she did.

My breathing regulating, I yank off my wool scarf and wrap it tightly around her squirming ankles. Then I slide off my leather belt and wrap it tightly around her bony wrists as she futilely tries to fight off Moo. So tightly I may have cut off her circulation.

"What are you doing?" she shrieks.

"I'm tying you up, you psycho. What does it look like?"

I then reach for my phone and call 911 as my cat in shining armor continues to mangle her like a ferocious tiger.

I saved his life. Now, he's saved mine.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The police and the paramedics arrive quickly.

When they make their way into my apartment, they find Evangeline, tied up on the floor, screaming and writhing. Before they showed up, I managed to wrestle Moo off her. Unfortunately, I've had to lock up my heroic cat in my office.

"She tried to kill me," I tell them, my voice low-key, "with that kitchen knife on the floor." The two officers, one male, the other female, follow my finger as I point at it. "My cat attacked her and saved me."

"She's a murderer!" Evangeline cries out, over and over, her blood-streaked face contorting. "She needs to be put away! Pay!"

"I think she's psychotic," I tell the police while the paramedics attempt to treat her facial wounds.

"Has she ever tried to do anything like this to you before?" asks the attractive Black female officer.

I nod. "I believe she attacked me while I was living in New Jersey and taking a walk on Christmas Eve, but I can't prove it. I didn't catch a look at my assaulter." I take a breath. "And when I moved to New York, she began sending me threatening texts and emails, but again I have no proof it was her."

"Can you show us some?"

Rather than showing them on my computer in my office where Moo is, I scroll for them on my phone. I find them easily. The officers regard them with great interest.

"I'm afraid we'll have to take your phone as evidence, as well as the knife."

They can have the knife as I never want to see it again. But my phone? I can't live without my cell! I beg them to let me keep it. They compromise and offer to return it after I come down to the precinct and give a statement.

"Are you free to come in now?" asks the young, boyish male cop. "You can ride with us."

I run my fingers through my disheveled hair. "I'm afraid I can't do that right away. I have an important family obligation." *My darn mother*, though if I went with them now it would be an excuse not to have to spend time with her today. I almost change my mind as I watch the paramedics cart off a kicking and screaming Evangeline, restrained in a straitjacket and strapped to a gurney.

"Murderer!" she keeps screaming until I can longer hear her. They've likely taken the madwoman out of the building via the service elevator. I return my attention to the officers.

"But I can come in later today any time after four or first thing tomorrow morning."

"Let's go for today." The female officer hands me her card with the address of the precinct. "We'll expect you at four thirty."

After they leave, I desperately want to call Logan and tell him everything that's happened. But, damn it, I don't have my phone. It'll have to wait until tonight when I get it back and he comes home from work.

Thank goodness my mother shows up after the police and paramedics have left. I've decided I'm not going to tell her what happened. If she finds out, we'll go from there. It's unlikely.

We spend the next few hours at the Marshalls located on Broadway between West 77th and 78th Streets. It's closing at the end of the month. Everything is on sale. Even the already discounted items.

While I mope around the store, my knees still killing me, my mother has a field day. She scoops up several hideous pieces of clothing for herself and Cliff. And much to my consternation, she buys a bunch of baby clothes.

“Mom, don’t you think this is a little premature?” I tell her as she gets them rung up.

“Honey, you’re gonna need them soon,” she says cheerfully. “And they’re such a steal!”

The mention of the word “steal” makes me flinch. But I recover quickly.

Lastly, she offers to buy me a wedding a gift. The main reason for our excursion here. We wander the barebones home department until I find exactly what I want.

A new set of kitchen knives. On sale

The biggest and sharpest I can find.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

January morphs into February.

You'd think with Evangeline out of my life, the threats to my life silenced, I'd be productive.

But I'm not.

Both my agent and editor are badgering me for the new book.

My one idea for a young adult fantasy about a fire-breathing dragon-flying princess and her frenemy love interest, a prince who rides fire hydrants, didn't fly with either of them, no pun intended. I told them it could be as big as Rebecca Yarros's blockbuster hit, *Fourth Wing*, but they didn't buy that either. They both hated my elevator pitch and told me it was totally "off brand." My readers want more crime thrillers and psychological suspense stories from me.

Maybe I should revisit *Octoplus*, that short story I conceived in grad school. But then I learn about a new book that's on every bestseller list and the darling of every celebrity book club. *Remarkably Bright Creatures*. Shockingly, it's almost the same story... about an elderly aquarium worker who befriends an octopus that helps her solve a murder. I can't believe it. The only big difference is mine was about a college student. It can't be a coincidence. A talking crime-solving octopus? Come on! I bet the author, Shelby Van Pelt, stole the idea from me! I mean, what are the odds of another thriller featuring a cephalopodic protagonist? I google her to see if she went to grad school with me; I don't recall that being the name of a classmate. Maybe it's a pen name. Nope.

Van Pelt (her real name), a former financial analyst, came up with the idea when she took a fiction writing course at Emory University in Atlanta.

I want to kick myself. Sue that professor who dissuaded me from expanding it.

I could have become a huge literary bestseller. Not have had to resort to being Barbara Van Wyck's overworked, under-appreciated assistant.

And not have had to resort to stealing her manuscript.

What I did still haunts me to the core. I'm a fraud. An imposter. A plagiarist. A fake. And I still fear someone will find me out. Who knows... maybe even my husband, Logan, will uncover the unthinkable thing I did.

Logan, who was more distraught about the Evangeline incident than I was, has been working long hours. Going to the office early, coming home late. Even working on weekends. It's that big, secret case he can't tell me about. I miss him terribly and relish any time we have a meal together or have sex, which is becoming less and less. At this rate, I may never get to use those baby clothes my mother bought.

Except for a few podcasts, my life has been uneventful. All I seem to do is waste another day and get nowhere. This lack of accomplishment has only added to my anxiety. On Groundhog Day, I'm about to go for a jog with the hope of clearing my head, when my intercom buzzes. It's Mike the doorman. There's a delivery for me.

"What is it?" I ask, not expecting anything.

"Just a padded envelope with your name on it."

A mixture of curiosity and worry washes over me. I tell Mike to have someone bring it up.

The doorbell rings and I retrieve the envelope from the building superintendent.

It's unmarked and rather than my real name, the black block letters spell out my pen name. *S.L. Whitman*. It feels a bit weighty.

Is it something from my agent? Publisher? Or perhaps something from a fan, which is kind of creepy because that means they know where I live.

My pulse accelerating, I tear the envelope open.

And jolt.

On my next strangled breath, I take out my phone and call one person.

The very last person I want to talk to.

Detective Frank McGrath.

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CHAPTER FORTY

The Maplewood Police and Municipal Court Building is located on Springfield Avenue, a couple miles away from The Village. The twenty-first century three-story brick and glass building looks more like a mansion built in the early 1900s. It's been lauded for its historical, eco-friendly design.

Upon entering the bustling building, I introduce myself to the woman manning the front desk and am led by a guard to Detective Frank McGrath's office.

The door open, he's at his metal desk finishing up a sandwich while reading a file. The smell of greasy pastrami permeates the small, windowless office.

The guard announces me, and after taking one more bite of his sandwich, the burly detective throws the remains into a brown paper bag and then tosses it in a wastepaper basket. He summons me to come in.

"Have a seat," he says, taking off his reading glasses and motioning with his cleft chin to the two tweed armchairs facing his desk. There are no warm smiles or salutations, though it's not as if I was expecting him to leap up from his desk and give me a hug.

Anxiously, I ease myself onto one of the chairs, keeping my coat on and my bag on my lap. I quickly take in the office.

It's pretty barebones and utilitarian. The eggshell-white walls are empty except for a few framed certificates and awards, and nailed to one is a massive whiteboard with the timeline of a case he's working

on. It's not Barbara's. Behind his desk, there's a credenza stacked with files. On his desk sits a large computer, more files, a single framed photo, and a can of root beer. The sleeves of his button-down shirt are rolled up, revealing his hairy contoured forearms. His holster with a gun is slung across his barrel chest. I wonder how many times in his life he's used it. Take that back. I don't want to know.

"Thanks for seeing me at such short notice," I say as he pulls out a notebook and ballpoint pen from his top desk drawer.

"So, Ms. White, you've come to turn yourself in?" I can't tell if he's half serious or half joking.

"No!" I say indignantly. "And for your information, my name is now Mrs. White-Peterson."

My hands are folded on my bag, and his beady eyes dart to my ring finger. He studies the small diamond.

"So, I presume you married your friend. The Peterson kid?"

I twitch a half-smile. "You presumed right."

No congratulations. Instead, he says, "So, *Mrs. White-Peterson—*"

I cut him off. "You can just call me Sloan."

"So, *Sloan*, to what can I attribute the pleasure of your company?" The sarcasm in his voice makes me bristle. I simply blurt it out.

"Someone wants to kill me!"

He rolls his eyes. "Not again?"

I'm sure he's referring to longtime Maplewood resident, Evangeline Hayes. I've learned she's been confined to a psychiatric hospital indefinitely and since I didn't press charges, foolishly or not, she won't be standing trial.

He shakes his head. "That poor woman. I hope one day she gets the justice she deserves, though it's now out of my jurisdiction." He's always sided with her, hoping he could bring closure to her daughter's case. What happened to her was ruled an accident, though neither Evangeline nor he ever believed that.

A rush of guilt surges in my chest, but I push it back. My voice grows more assertive.

"It's someone else."

He rolls back his desk chair and stretches his legs on his desk. "I've honestly never met anyone as popular as you when it comes to being a murder target."

I clench my hands. I want to punch him so badly my fists hurt. But assaulting a police officer will do me way more harm than good. And let's not forget, he has that gun.

Composing myself, I slip out the padded manila envelope from my backpack. "This was delivered to my apartment this morning." I glance down at his meaty hands. His ring finger still bears a gold band. "You may want to put some gloves on before you open this."

Perplexed, he reaches inside his desk drawer again and retrieves a pair of latex gloves. He slips them over his thick gun-wielding fingers.

I watch as he undoes the clasp, then reaches inside the envelope and removes the contents. Three items in total. He sets them on his desk.

He unfolds the small child's garment first. It's starch-white linen and resembles an old-fashioned christening gown. He lowers his eyes.

Printed in blood-red marker across the fabric is one word—DIE!

A perplexed McGrath gazes up at me. "Are you pregnant or something?"

"No! And this is no joke." I point at the shiny object next to it. "That's Barbara's gold Cartier watch..."

He studies it. "How do you know it's hers?"

"She had very tiny wrists. Look how small the band is. Turn it over."

He does as I ask and squints at the inscription on the back of the case:

BVW

"BMW?"

"No, BVW. Her initials."

His narrowed eyes stay on the monogrammed watch. "How do I know *you* didn't steal it?"

“Because I’m *not* a thief!” *Liar!* I’m the biggest thief I know. I stole her manuscript. I point at the third item—a white business-size envelope. “Take a look at the note inside. It was written on her typewriter!”

Shoving his glasses back on, he removes it from the envelope and unfolds it, then reads it out loud. He’s able to make out the words despite the glaring typos.

*CONGRATULATIONX ON YOUR NUPTIALX.
UNTIL DEATH DO YOU PART.*

He glances up at me. “How do you know this note was written on her typewriter?”

“I recognize the font. Moreover, her “S” key was broken and she always substituted with the letter “X” when she typed.” I suck in a breath and look him dead in the eye.

“Whoever killed Barbara Van Wyck wants to kill me.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I watch as McGrath folds up the note and returns everything to the manila envelope. "I'm going to hold on to this stuff. Hand it over to forensics."

"Fine by me, but I should tell you in advance, you will find my fingerprints. I wasn't wearing gloves when I opened the package."

Saying nothing, he takes a sip of his root beer. "Hey, are you busy this afternoon?"

I silently snort. If staring at a blank page on your computer screen counts, then I guess I'm very busy.

"Not really. I was just going to head back to the city and *try* to get in some writing."

"I'm gonna head over to the old broad's mansion. Maybe we missed something and/or there will be fresh fingerprints." He stands and lumbers over to his trench coat hanging from a hook on the back of his door. "Wanna come along? Maybe you'll see something we didn't."

I'm in like Flint.

Barbara's murder is no longer a cold case.

EVERGREEN IS EXACTLY as I remember it. Except more derelict. The rose bushes bear brown, mite-bitten leaves, the lawn is a

jaundiced yellow, and thorny, purple vines have begun to climb up the brick and stone exterior as if taking the house prisoner. A cloud of death seems to have descended upon it.

McGrath has brought along a forensics expert from the force. A young colleague named Lieutenant Ramirez, who's going to dust for fresh fingerprints among other things. Whoever murdered Barbara and stole her watch must have returned to the mansion to type the letter to me. The death threat.

Ramirez leads the way to the front door. He has a key. McGrath and I follow him. Just like old times, I trip on one of the steps. The detective saves me from a nasty spill and tells me to hold on to him.

A strange feeling I can't put into words falls over me as we step into the soaring entryway with its massive wrought-iron chandelier and sweeping oak staircase. A thick layer of dust coats the banisters, balustrades, and steps. The house hasn't been cleaned in over a year. Nor changed.

I expect to hear Barbara typing away, but all that prevails is an eerie silence.

"Boss," says Ramirez, "I'm gonna go through the house and dust for fingerprints."

"Start with the downstairs first," replies McGrath. "Pay special attention to her typewriter. And also look out for footprints."

"Gotcha."

"We'll check out the upstairs." He gives me a quick sideways glance, before returning his attention to his colleague. "Let me know if you find anything."

"Will do," says Ramirez as he strides off toward Barbara's office.

Like us, he's wearing protective gloves and shoe coverings to prevent cross-contamination of the evidence. This is so cool. I feel like I'm filming a CSI episode. Or I'm Nancy Drew.

"C'mon," signals McGrath. "Stay close and try not to touch anything."

We mount the grand staircase, McGrath leading the way. His gun out. It makes me nervous that I can't hold on to the banister. What if I stumble and fall? His gun isn't going to save me from breaking my neck.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I stand in awe. A gorgeous floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window greets us and lets light into the otherwise dark, gloomy landing. There's a long hallway on either side that extends the width of the house with dust-coated wood floor planks and thick plaster walls. Antique oil paintings of fierce-looking, aristocratic women line the walls. I didn't know Barbara was a collector of any sorts. What other treasures will we find?

This is actually the first time I've been up here. Except for eating my bag lunch in the servants' quarters behind the kitchen and using the maid's bathroom, I was confined to her office-slash-library. At her beck and call.

There appears to be about a dozen bedrooms lining the long hallway. The first one we step into is clearly Barbara's. My jaw drops in awe. The size of my entire two-bedroom apartment, maybe bigger, it's anchored by an enormous four-poster rosewood bed draped with a burgundy velvet spread that matches the curtains flanking the mullion windows. Situated in the middle of the room on a worn Aubusson rug, the bed faces a massive, wood-burning stone fireplace. Standing against one wall is a mirrored rosewood armoire, and against another is a matching dresser with a half dozen mannequin heads wearing assorted red-haired wigs. On the floor next to one side of the bed is a three-feet-high pile of books. Among the titles, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, and E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Barbara read erotica? The tower reaches to the top of her night table. Resting on the table is a silver-framed, sepia photo of a cherubic baby with a crown of copper curls. I study it. There's something haunting about it.

The infant is dressed in an elegant white, laced-trimmed christening gown, similar to the one that was sent to me, and is so beautiful, it's hard to tell if it's a boy or a girl. Was this child an inspiration for *Black (né White) Lies*, which is about a septuagenarian writer and the child she abandoned, who seeks revenge as an adult? One of the very twisted elements of the book is that the child's name is Morgan, a unisex name, which I changed to Taylor. Whenever not referred to as Morgan, the character was referred to as "my baby" or "my child" or "they." It was as if Barbara deliberately wanted to keep the child's sex a secret from the reader,

and let them draw their own conclusion... until the big reveal at the end that it's a girl. Her bastard daughter. To make the book my own, I changed the child's gender to a boy and actually thought it worked better that way. Critics lauded this narrative device.

I ponder who this child in the photo could be. Is it some random photo Barbara found somewhere or is there a blood connection? Weirdly, the child looks a lot like me as a baby. My mom told me people always said I was a beautiful baby. Sadly, they don't say that about me anymore.

"Detective McGrath," I call out. "Did Barbara have any relatives?" Though I recall reading in her *New York Times* obituary that she left behind no survivors, I want to double-check.

He's exploring the contents of her drawers, holding a flashlight. "Not that I know of. From what I hear the house is going into probate and may become a National Historic Landmark."

I further explore the bedroom. It's actually a suite with an art deco tiled bathroom, a huge walk-in closet filled with shimmering siren-like gowns and rows of sparkling heels, and a movie star-like dressing room with a mirrored vanity displaying trays of multi-color glass perfume bottles, makeup in glimmering gold cases, and glittering costume jewelry. Maybe Barbara's murderer came up here when they returned and stole some of the pieces, thinking they were valuable. I tell McGrath my theory, and he bags the jewels to brush for fresh fingerprints. I'm beginning to think that Barbara lived a secret fantasy life where she pranced around in her wigs, slinky gowns, and sparkling heels. Maybe it fueled her novels. Or some imposter syndrome.

It's all so creepy.

Detective McGrath sneezes, then starts to wheeze, breaking into my thoughts.

"Are you okay?" I ask, genuine concern in my voice.

His eyes are tearing and his face is turning crimson.

"Damnit! I may have compromised the evidence."

He wheezes again and again, barely able to catch his breath or speak.

"I—I gotta get out of here," he manages. "I'm allergic to vintage fabrics. I'm having an asthma attack. I've gotta run to my car and get

my inhaler.” He gasps for air. “Come with me downstairs. I don’t want you up here alone.”

Trust me, the last thing I want is to be alone in Barbara’s bedroom. And see her specter. Or have some flesh-eating Barbara zombie burst out of the armoire. Every fiber of my being vibrates with dread.

Following the wheezing detective, I descend the stairs and after he assures me he’ll be okay, I head directly to Barbara’s office. Lieutenant Ramirez is gone. He must be canvassing the other rooms. God knows how many there are on the main floor as Barbara’s office is, other than the kitchen and the maid’s bathroom, the only one I’ve ever stepped foot in.

My nerves buzzing, I enter the beamed-ceiling, wood-paneled room. My eyes circle it. Except for dust and cobwebs everywhere, it hasn’t changed a bit. Barbara’s red Selectric typewriter is exactly where it always sat. On top of her Louis the Whoey desk. The only thing that’s missing is her. The memory of finding her dead at her desk flashes into my head. It feels like only yesterday and makes my skin crawl.

Then, the weirdest thing happens. The keys of Barbara’s keyboard start typing on their own... like one of those tricked-out pianos. As if invisible fingers are pressing them. Dancing on the keyboard. Faster and faster. *Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.* I’m freaking out, sweat beading everywhere. On my forehead. Chest. And behind my knees.

Oh my God. The house is haunted. There’s a poltergeist!

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Barbara! I feel her spirit. Hear her voice.

I know what you did.

Her voice so sonorous the walls shake. The lights flicker. Spiders fall. Dropping like rainwater. I shriek. I cower. I hate spiders.

Then another voice. It's Lieutenant Ramirez. He's standing next to me. "Hey, are you okay?"

"L-lieutenant," I stammer, pointing at the Selectric. "Look! The keys are typing on their own. Sending us a message! Look at all the spiders landing on the keyboard!"

I turn to look at him. With a quizzical expression, the good-looking young detective meets my eyes. "You must be seeing things. I just dusted this room and nothing is out of order. Trust me, *nada*." He scratches his head. "I saw a couple of spiders, but that's about it."

I gaze down again at the typewriter. He's right. The ancient red typewriter is as still as a statue. Not a key is moving and there are no spiders in sight. No one else is in the room except Ramirez.

Another one of my hallucinations. Inhaling a shuddery breath, I brush the sweat off my forehead and notice something. The crystal seashell-shaped ashtray that Barbara always kept on her desk is missing. The one into which she always flicked the ashes of her icky black French cigarettes. I assume it must have been taken as evidence when McGrath and his team first investigated her murder. It triggers a question, one that's been on my mind for a while.

“Lieutenant, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Was Barbara Van Wyck interred or cremated?” I have the burning desire—no pun intended—to know that she’s really dead.

“Cremated. Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious.” The image of Barbara’s flesh burning and her bones turning to ash gives me the heebie-jeebies. But, at least I know The Barbarian is dead. Really dead.

Before I can ask him where Barbara’s ashes are, he darts off and proceeds with his investigation. To my great relief, I no longer see the black typewriter keys jumping. They’re as still as the tombstones in a graveyard.

Yet, in my mind’s eye, I can see mink-clad Barbara at her desk typing away. Hear the sound of the keys.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

Questions swirl in my head.

Was she typing when she was strangled? Didn’t hear the intruder enter?

Was it just some lowlife burglar who resorted to murder?

Or was it someone who wanted her dead?

And now wants me dead. But why?

A rat skitters by. I startle, then wonder what does the rat know? Did he witness Barbara’s murder? Watch her killer type my death threat?

Outside the office, I hear the thud of heavy footfalls. They must belong to Detective McGrath. He’s back and must have recovered from his asthma attack. But instead of joining him, I pivot and face Barbara’s wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, built-in bookshelf. Divided into five sections, every book is perfectly lined up, color coded, and organized by genre. Copies of her books, in all the different languages and formats they’ve been published in, occupy the majority of it. The rest are old editions of classics she’s read. One book is amiss. It’s sticking out.

I stride over to it. Her ancient red leather-bound *Roget’s International Edition Thesaurus*. Barbara never let me touch it because it was a rare first edition so whenever Barbara barked at me to find a synonym, I looked for one online, which was fine by me.

Impulsively, I pull the thick, worn volume out from the corner where it sits, and jolt so hard I almost fall backward.

The thesaurus shakes in my hand. It's opened a hidden door to a secret room!

And when I see what's inside it, my jaw falls to the floor. Along with the reference book.

This is no hallucination.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“Detectives, come here!” I yell when I can finally get my mouth to work.

I can’t believe my eyes. Before me is a child’s nursery. Complete with a canopied crib and matching dresser, a vintage bentwood rocking chair, and an old-fashioned, hand-painted rocking horse. It’s like something out of a Charles Dickens novel.

Oddly the lights—a half dozen Tiffany glass-style wall sconces—are on. Dimly lit. Was someone in here recently?

The room is windowless. The air smells musty. Like Barbara’s office, dust coats the furniture and cobwebs cling to the corners of the beamed vaulted ceiling. In my imagination, I hear a baby wail. A shiver zips through me. It feels haunted.

I hear footfalls behind me. Without looking over my shoulder, I say, “You’ve got to see this.”

Lieutenant Ramirez responds first. “Holy guacamole. A secret room!”

No longer wheezing, McGrath remains silent, observant. Then orders Ramirez to dust it for fingerprints.

The detective and I remain at the threshold. Chilling questions make my blood run cold.

Did Barbara have a secret baby? One she gave birth to? Adopted? Kidnapped? Did the infant in the photo I saw on her night table sleep here? She sure didn’t seem like the type who liked babies or children. I can’t imagine her changing diapers or prancing

around with a baby in her arms wearing one of her movie-star gowns and/or her mink. Then again, she could have had a Joan Crawford fixation. She and *Mommie Dearest* looked so much alike. Like they were separated at birth.

I scan the room. Houses, they say, have eyes and can remember. If these walls could talk, what would they say? I eerily feel secrets hidden in every nook and cranny.

Interestingly, the prologue of Barbara's—um, cough—my novel takes place in a nursery just like this. Was Barbara's last book partly autobiographical? Inspired by true-life events? I remember she said it was "personal."

I return my gaze to McGrath. He seems shaken. Scratching at that cluster of scars above his left eyebrow, his weight shifting from side to side.

"What do you think?" I ask him.

He narrows his eyes, tightens his face. "I think Barbara Van Wyck was whacked."

Okay, she was eccentric, but whacked seems a little extreme. Before I can ask him to elaborate, he calls out to his partner. "Ramirez, also check the drawers for anything unusual."

"Sure thing, boss."

McGrath and I keep our eyes on him as he sifts through the drawers.

"Find anything?" asks McGrath.

"Just some fancy baby clothes, toys, and glass milk bottles." The lieutenant also retrieves an immaculate white gift box, big enough to hold a ream of paper, wrapped with a faded blue ribbon. It's likely some baby outfit though he doesn't take the time to open it.

"Bag everything," orders McGrath. "And all the bedding too."

We continue to stand at the threshold while I watch the lieutenant carry out his orders. The baby clothes are all baptismal white and remind me of the morbid christening gown someone sent me. I'm about to mention this to McGrath when another, more pressing thought surfaces.

I clear my throat. "Detective, I need to confess something."

He cocks a brow. "What now?"

"When I returned to Barbara's house and found her dead—"

He cuts me off and looks at me crossly. "You said you thought she was sleeping."

I feel myself cringe. "Um, uh, I wasn't being one hundred percent truthful. I fled her house thinking she was dead though I didn't check for a heartbeat or any sign of her breathing."

"Why did you lie to me?" McGrath sounds angry.

"To be honest, I was scared. I thought you might arrest me."

He breathes in and out of his nose. "I wouldn't have arrested you. There wasn't sufficient evidence to charge you." He pauses. "But I could get you thrown in jail for obstruction of justice. It's a crime—a misdemeanor—that comes with a fine and an up to five-year sentence."

I can already feel handcuffs on my wrists. I gulp past the lump in my throat. I'm sure he can hear me.

"But don't worry. Today's your lucky day. I'm not going to do anything."

I audibly sigh with relief. I almost want to hug him.

"Thanks," I say contritely.

He cracks a half-smile. "So, what were you going to tell me?"

"So, what I was going to say is that when I found Barbara dead, slumped over her typewriter, it felt like someone was watching me..."

Steal Barbara's manuscript.

McGrath cuts into my flashback. "What made you think that?"

"I heard weird noises. Rattling. Even something that sounded like a sneeze."

McGrath's bushy brows knit together. "What are you getting at?"

"What I'm saying is that maybe whoever killed Barbara hid in this room when I arrived and found her dead. Right after they'd murdered her."

McGrath twists a corner of his lips. "How would they know about this secret room?"

"That's a good question. Maybe it was just luck or perhaps they'd been here before."

He looks at me suspiciously. "How did you discover it?"

"By luck." I tell him about the thesaurus.

"Hmm. It reminds me of some horror movie I watched as a kid."

A bit skeptical, he moves on. “How would whoever was hiding behind the case been able to see you?”

I’ve read too many Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes novels. “Maybe there’s a peephole in the secret bookshelf door...”

“That seems far-fetched, but let’s check it out.”

We both step inside the nursery. The door on this side looks like an ordinary door with a doorknob...

And a peephole!

Holy guacamole as Ramirez would say.

McGrath and I take turns peering through it and I can clearly see Barbara’s office. It offers a bird’s-eye view of her desk and her Selectric. A chill runs through me. Someone knows I stole Barbara’s manuscript. The someone who murdered her. The someone who may murder me!

McGrath grows agitated. “Ramirez, finish up. And let’s get the hell out of here.”

As the detective lumbers toward the front door of the house, I linger in Barbara’s office and stare at her red Selectric typewriter. It triggers a memory. An episode of *Columbo* I once watched. It was one of the best ones ever. “Now You See Him.”

In the episode, Columbo busts a cunning world-famous magician named Santini for murdering a money-hungry nightclub owner, who’s threatened to expose Santini’s Nazi past if he doesn’t pay up. After shooting the club owner, Santini steals the incriminating letter to US authorities from the dead blackmailer’s typewriter, a then revolutionary IBM Selectric. The letter may be missing, but clever Columbo uncovers it by examining the typewriter’s carbon ribbon on which the words are imprinted.

Barbara’s carbon typewriter ribbon likewise has the words of her manuscript on it—well, at least the last third of the four-hundred plus pages—which if discovered could incriminate me. It likely also contains the words of the threatening note her murderer sent me.

I know how to remove and change the cartridge; I did it over a dozen times while in Barbara’s employ. I hated doing it. Sitting with her arms folded across her chest, The Barbarian would yell at me to hurry up as I bumbled with replacing it. I finally got the hang of it.

Checking to see that Ramirez is still busy in the nursery, I lift up the top of the typewriter case and pull the red lever. It frees the cartridge. I snap it out and drop it into my backpack. Then, carefully clamp the top back down.

As long as the cartridge is in my possession, I'm safe from someone discovering that I stole Barbara's manuscript.

Well, safer. Again, I wonder: do houses have eyes and remember? I feel the walls caving in on me and shiver. I need to get out of here.

Ramirez steps out of the secret room with his equipment and a see-through plastic bag with all the baby stuff... and the gift box. I return the thesaurus to the bookshelf and after the secret door closes, we leave together. Thank goodness, he doesn't notice that the ribbon cartridge is missing.

As I follow him out of the house, something dawns on me.

There is one person, for sure, who must have known about the secret nursery.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Detective McGrath drops me off at the train station. He tells me he'll get in touch if there are any developments, and for me to stay out of trouble. He has no clue about how much trouble I'm already in. If any death threats come my way, to let him know.

Once his car is out of sight, I call for an Uber. Throughout the fifteen-minute drive, I think about the secret room. And Barbara's book. Besides telling me it was personal, she once told me: "You need to rip your story out of your real life." Was her book inspired by the child (a daughter?) she gave up or had ripped out of her life? Maybe the book has clues to who killed her and might kill me. When I get back home, I'm going to reread my version of the book and look for them. Except for changing character names and verb tenses, they're almost the same.

"We're here," says the driver, pulling me out of my thoughts. After thanking him, I collect my things and hop out of the car.

Priscilla's house sits on a tree-lined street in Bloomfield, a working-class town that's close to affluent Maplewood. The small one-story clapboard abode is painted a cornflower blue with white shutters and is nicely maintained. Priscilla was a housekeeper her whole life so I'm not surprised how neat and tidy it is.

Taking a deep breath, I march down the shrub-lined walkway and climb the steps to the front porch. I ring the bell, hoping she'll be home.

Before I can count to ten, the front door opens.

Standing before me is a diminutive septuagenarian with crinkly blue eyes and a halo of silver-white curls. She looks younger, more rested than when I saw her last. Maybe *not* working for demanding Barbara comes with benefits. Her face lights up at the sight of me.

“Dear Lord... Sloan!”

I’m totally taken aback. I thought she was mute. Couldn’t speak.

“How lovely to see you again! Do come in.”

Wearing a worn, blue fleece robe and fuzzy slippers, she ushers me inside to a small living room furnished with blue floral upholstery and brown wood furniture. Knickknacks abound. I sit down on one of the chairs, placing my backpack on the carpeted floor. I notice she now walks with a slight limp.

“Can I get you some tea?” she asks kindly.

“You can talk?” I blurt out.

She smiles and gives a little laugh. I’ve never seen or heard her do either. They’re both charming.

“Yes, I had what they call selective mutism. It was caused by stress and a traumatic event in my life. My voice came back after Barbara died.” She quickly drops the subject. “Would chamomile be okay?”

“That would be lovely.” I’m glad it’s decaffeinated, because after my visit to Barbara’s house I’m feeling jumpy.

She returns quickly with two cups of tea on a silver tray, along with a small pitcher of milk, bowl of sugar, a plate of butter cookies, and a couple of dainty napkins. She places the tray on the wood coffee table and then takes a seat catty-corner to me. I add a teaspoon of sugar and a little milk to my cup of tea and take a sip. It’s comforting.

She mimics me and takes a sip. I pretend not to notice the slight tremor in her hand.

She pats her lips with one of the napkins. “First off, a congratulations is in order.”

She knows about my book and read it? What comes out of her mouth takes me aback.

“For marrying my nephew, Logan!”

My eyes pop. “Logan is your nephew? I knew he lived with his aunt, but I had no idea it was you.”

“Yes, my sister, Tilda’s son. There are a few pictures of him and her on the fireplace mantel. I wish I had more, but he was very camera-shy.”

“May I take a closer look at them?”

Priscilla smiles. “Of course.”

Setting my cup of tea on the coffee table, I rise and pad over to the mantel. There are five in total, taken at different times in Logan’s life. I notice how his ginger hair used to be more of a strawberry blond and curlier. How skinny he was. In every one, he’s smiling a sad smile. There’s no twinkle in his eyes. Maybe the latter are just manifestations of his aversion to having his picture taken.

I return to the chair and put my tea to my lips. After a sip, I ask Priscilla if Tilda was her older or younger sister. There’s not much of a resemblance between them. Tilda’s tall and lanky like Logan with similar color hair whereas Priscilla is short and petite and was likely a brunette before her hair turned silver.

“She was my fraternal twin,” responds Priscilla, her face growing somber. “May she and her husband, Homer, rest in peace. Such a tragedy they perished when their car imploded. It was on its last leg. I kept telling them to buy a new one, but they couldn’t scrape up the money. And I, with my meager wages, couldn’t help.”

Cheapskate Barbara. Damn her!

I take another small sip of my tea. “Why weren’t you at our wedding reception?”

“I was incapacitated. Recovering from hip replacement surgery.” Again, her face grows solemn. “All those years slaving for Barbara in that big house took its toll on my body. The hip replacement was a success, but I’m severely arthritic. It’s hard for me to get around these days.”

A thought slithers into my head. Would that give Priscilla motive to murder Barbara? That and her pettiness?

On my next blink, I banish it. There’s no way this tiny woman with her tiny, shaking hands could have strangled Barbara. Her fingers would barely fit around her neck.

Another question scratches at my brain. The reason I’ve come to see her.

“Priscilla, can I ask you something?”

Another smile. "Of course. At my age, I have nothing to hide."

"Did you know about the secret room behind Barbara's bookshelf?"

Trembling, she hesitates. "Y-yes. I had to upkeep it. Barbara was very particular about keeping it dust-free and clean. And the floors and furnishings polished to a shine."

"Did Barbara ever have a baby?"

More hesitation. A dark memory flashes in her eyes. She nods. "The baby died. Crib death."

Now, I know. Is that the traumatic event that caused Barbara to lose her hair? Priscilla to lose her voice?

She imbibes more tea. "Now, let's talk about something else... you." Giving me no time to ask about the sex of the baby or the circumstances, she congratulates me on my book.

My eyes grow wide. "You read it?"

"Yes, when it first came out. I have it on my Kindle so that my failing eyes could read it with big print."

I smile. "If you'd like, I can send you a signed copy."

"I'd love that!" She bites into a cookie. "Have one," she says, wiping a crumb off from her thin lips. "I baked them myself."

I help myself to one. "Wow! These are delicious."

She beams. "Thank you. And I meant to tell you your book reminded me so much of the book Barbara was working on. I sneaked a couple of looks at it while you ran errands and she was napping."

My stomach churns. I suddenly feel woozy.

If Priscilla knew about the secret room, was she there peering through the peephole and watching me steal the manuscript? She came every day to clean, holidays included.

She must still have the keys to Evergreen. Is she the one who typed my death threat with her arthritic fingers? It's hard to believe. But something's not sitting right with me.

She may say she has nothing to hide.

But there's something she's not telling me.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Sitting on the couch with my book and my third glass of wine, Moo curled up asleep beside me, I wait up for Logan to come home. I'm too distracted by today's events to be looking for clues to the identity of Barbara's murderer. And the person who is stalking me. The original book, I recall, was dedicated to someone whose name started with the letter "M." *For M. I'll never forget what you did.* The letter her fictional daughter's name began with... Morgan. Now that I know her child died of SIDS, it must be someone else. That's as far as I get, the wine clouding my thinking.

I'm checking the time on my watch when Logan walks in. It's almost ten thirty.

"Sloan, what are you doing up so late?" he asks as he traipses across the room to the bar. He pours himself a scotch.

I butterfly my book on the coffee table. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

He takes a swig of his drink. "Honey, can it wait till morning?"

"Actually no."

"Okay, then... Let me just get comfortable." He settles into his favorite chair, taking off his jacket and loosening his tie. It's the sage green one I bought him on a whim that brings out the color of his eyes.

Making myself more comfortable, I fold my legs under me. "I took the train to New Jersey this morning. Maplewood. For another book signing at The Village Bookstore."

Trusting my gut, I don't tell him the true reason. To meet with Detective McGrath. Nor do I tell him we went to Barbara's mansion. And what we discovered.

Lies of omission.

He takes another swig of his scotch. "Why didn't you tell me you were going?"

I shrug. "Just an oversight. I've been in a brain fog lately. I have a lot on my mind."

He chuckles. "Tell me. I do too."

I brush a stray strand of hair out of my eye. "After I was done signing, I did something impulsive. I went to visit Barbara's old housekeeper, Priscilla Watkins."

He imbibes more of his drink, says nothing.

I look him in the eye. "Do you know her?"

Another sip and he says, "You mean my aunt? Of course, I do."

I'm taken aback. I was sure I'd taken him by surprise. But instead, he's taken me by surprise.

"Why didn't you ever tell me the aunt you lived with was Barbara Van Wyck's housekeeper? Your mother's fraternal twin?" The tone of my voice is challenging. Borderline snippy.

He chugs his scotch. "I'm sorry. I thought I did. Don't you remember?"

Maybe he did. So much has happened over the past year it's hard to keep things straight. I've had hallucinations, heard voices, and even wondered: am I losing my mind?

My voice wavers. "She seems very fond of you, and is happy we're married."

He twitches a smile. "That's good."

I keep an eye on him as he finishes his drink. His face is impassive. He clearly doesn't want to talk about her. "Don't you want to know how she is?"

"She's fine. She called me and told me you came by."

I'm at a loss for words. Confused. "We should visit her more often."

He toys with his tie. "You're right. We should."

With that he sets his tumbler down on the coffee table and tells me he's beat. He retreats to our bedroom.

I'm tempted to drain the last remaining drop of his scotch. But refrain.

Maybe I overreacted. I let the Priscilla connection go.

Knowing that Barbara's typewriter ribbon cartridge is hidden under the cushion I'm sitting on, I rise and follow Logan to our bedroom.

Tomorrow, I'll decide whether to keep it or dispose of it.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The month of February should be eliminated. Literally torn out of the calendar.

It's so damn depressing. Everyone, including myself, is sick and tired of the cold weather, the gray skies, and the short days. Just when you spot the first sign of spring—a patch of burgeoning daffodils—it snows. And I'm talking a foot of snow covering every inch of green. Then the ugly slush comes and more gloom. Snow. Slush. Gloom. Repeat. It's a vicious cycle. Some days I don't want to get out of bed. And to make things worse, this year's a leap year so there's one more awful February day to get through. At least the groundhog didn't see his shadow, meaning we will have an early spring. Thank goodness for that.

On the home front, things are equally glum. I'd hardly call us the happy newlyweds. Logan's been working his butt off and growing more and more stressed. I wish he'd tell me what's going on at work, but truthfully, I'm not a good sounding board. I have my own share of stress. The pressure for me to send my new book to my agent and publisher has mounted to the point I'm taking Xanax daily. Three times a day—morning, noon, and night.

Clarisse gave me the name of a therapist. I went to see him at his fancy Fifth Avenue office, and the wannabe silver-bearded Freud told me I had writer's block. *Duh!* I could have paid myself two hundred fifty dollars for the hour-long session and reached that diagnosis. His plan is to help me dig deep inside myself to discover the source. I

don't have to do that. All I have to do is pass a Barnes and Noble display window and see my name written brightly on the cover of a book I didn't write. *Black Lies*. In fact, I don't even have to leave my apartment. All I have to do is go to my computer and check the Amazon bestseller list.

I've developed a routine. A jog in the morning. Social media and emails. Lunch. Blank Word doc time (BWDT). A barre class. The mail. More BWDT. Then a bottle of wine and/or dinner. Usually consumed alone because Logan usually never comes home before nine. And he's still working weekends.

The second Tuesday of this dreadful month called February, I go through my routine, and after coming home sore from a barre class, I go to the mail room and check my little bronzed box. Opening it with the minuscule metal key, I gather the contents and head upstairs to my condo.

After feeding Moo, I sift through the mail. The usual stuff. Bills. Credit card offers. Real estate listings. And then I get to a single business-size envelope with my pen name and address on it. It's postmarked three days ago from the Maplewood post office. Oddly, there's no return address. I tear it open. Then, pull out the contents.

My stomach lurches; I gasp. It's one of the pages of Barbara's manuscript that I stole. All the S's substituted with X's. Someone must have found it after it blew away in the snowstorm. The page is wrinkled, and some of the typewritten words are blurred from water damage. Three words in blood-red ink are scrolled across it:

YOURS OR MINE?

It's page sixty-nine of Barbara's typewritten manuscript where the mother, Eleanor, agrees to give up her one-month-old baby, Morgan.

Almost identical to page seventy-five of my hardcover book (location 5225 in the Kindle version) where the mother, Helen, decides to give up her three-month-old baby, Taylor.

Bile rises to the back of my throat.

Oh my God. There *is* someone out there who knows what I did.

Could it be Logan's aunt? My mind does somersaults. There's no way she could have followed me in the icy blizzard with her bad hip

and arthritis. Could one of the pages have randomly ended up by her house, and she found it? That seems unlikely too.

My first impulse is to call Detective McGrath, but I can't. Familiar with my novel and Barbara's malfunctioning typewriter, he'll know right away what I did.

I stole Barbara's manuscript.

Something I can't share with Logan either.

I hurry to our fireplace and turn it on. My heart racing, I fling the page into the flames and watch it burn to ashes.

Then, run to the bathroom and throw up.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The month of February goes from bad to worse. Not uncommon. I've lived through many.

I thought my vomitous reaction to that page from Barbara's original manuscript was just a one-time thing. It wasn't. Each successive day, I wake up sick to my stomach and throw up.

I must have that horrible flu that's going around. I grow weaker and weaker and take to my bed. I've instructed Logan to sleep on the couch in the living room or the foldout one in my office so he won't catch it and get sick, especially with the pressure he's facing at work.

At least I've got Moo, who is more than happy to cuddle with me.

The vomiting persists. I'm so sick and weak on Valentine's Day I cancel our dinner reservation at a romantic French restaurant and stay in. Logan uses the opportunity to meet with a client for dinner. He comes home at almost ten with a box of chocolates he got on sale at a Walgreens and a medley of flowers he picked up at a bodega. He's so beat that he heads straight to my office, leaving me to put the flowers in a vase. I eat a piece of the chocolate hoping it'll lift my spirits. Make me feel better. Instead, I almost retch.

The next morning, I sleep late, but as soon as I get up, I run to the toilet to throw up.

That's it. I've had it. Five pounds lighter and fatigued, I can no longer handle the nausea. I call my primary care doctor. Thank God, she had a cancellation and can see me.

She draws my blood and does several tests. One a pee test.

She shows me the stick. The two pink lines.

I blink once. Twice.

I'm pregnant!

Six weeks pregnant! I must have conceived that night back in January when Logan and I reconnected. And had wild, unprotected sex.

I attributed my missing period to all my stress.

I was wrong. Very wrong.

MY DOCTOR GIVES me a prescription for something that'll curb the nausea and make me feel better. She also tells me to stop taking my birth control pills and, to my relief, assures me the low level of hormones in them have not harmed the baby. After picking up the prescription at a nearby CVS, I take a cab to Logan's Midtown office. I can't wait to show him the stick and share the news. It's 12:30, and because I know he's likely stuck at his desk, I decide to surprise him with lunch.

Around the corner from his office building is a lovely café where I can pick up two chopped salads and a couple of bottled waters. No more beer or wine for me.

Crackling with excitement, I burst into the café and get my second surprise of the day. I stop dead in my tracks. My jaw goes slack, then falls to the floor as my husband rises from his chair and embraces a tall, chicly-dressed blond woman.

It's The Girl in Apartment 5C!

My heart practically stopping, I watch as he gallantly pulls out her chair, and once she's seated, they begin an animated conversation.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I dash out of the eatery before either of them can see me.

I'm having a baby.

And my husband is having an affair!

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

I spend the rest of the afternoon aimlessly wandering around the city. Even retail therapy doesn't lift me out of my funk... for lack of a better word.

A swarm of emotions bombards me. Shock. Sadness. Confusion. And I feel so duped. So naïve.

All this time I thought he was working late, he was cheating on me. With the gorgeous Girl in Apartment 5C. For all I know, he spent Valentine's eve screwing her in her apartment right next door to ours. I wouldn't be surprised if he bought her an exquisite box of Godiva chocolates or hand-dipped strawberries, an expensive bottle of champagne, and flowers from the most expensive florist in the city. And maybe a sexy negligee from that high-end lingerie store, Gloria's Secret.

I wish I could drown my sorrows with a bottle of whiskey, but I can't. Not with the little life-form growing inside of me. I pass a charming children's store and as I stare at all the adorable baby clothes in the window, I burst into tears. A harsh reality hits me. I'm likely going to be a single mom.

As I approach my apartment building (I've been walking for hours!), weighty questions press against my skull. How am I going to face him when he gets home from work? Should I not let on that I know he's having an affair or should I confront him?

The latter frightens me as I don't how far I'll go. Will I throw things at him? Kick him out of the house? Every thriller writer knows that

cheating spouses are the leading cause of murders. That new knife set I bought with my mom flashes into my head. The sharp, shiny blade of the ten-inch chef's knife glitters in my mind. Do I have it in me to drive it into him and kill him? I shiver at the very real possibility.

I wait for him to come home. Too distracted to do anything but sit on the living room couch and stare at my phone, wishing I could have a drink. Moo keeps me company. Maybe I can instruct my cat to attack him just the way he attacked Evangeline Hayes. It's unlikely, but the wicked fantasy keeps me from nodding off. I play it over and over in my head.

At exactly ten o'clock, I hear the front door open. Logan hooks his coat on the foyer coat hanger, then shuffles into the living room. He looks tired. Did he fuck her over his desk or bang her against a wall? That must be hard work, no pun intended.

"Hi, sweetheart." His voice weary, he loosens his tie and heads toward our bar cart to pour himself a drink.

"Stop!" I bark midway.

He spins around. Furrowing his brows, he looks perplexed. "What's the matter?"

I can feel my blood pressure rising. The anger boiling inside me. My face growing hot.

"Where the hell have you been?" I lash out.

He blinks a few times like he's dazed and confused. "At the office."

"Doing what?"

"Working."

"Don't bullshit me."

He rakes his hand through his rust-colored hair. "Jeez, Sloan, what's gotten into you?"

"I saw you at lunch?"

"You came downtown? Why didn't you call me?"

"I saw you with that blonde!" I grizzle, ignoring his questions.

"It was a business lunch. She's one of our clients."

I blow out a breath. "You really want me to believe that? I saw the way you embraced her!"

He rolls his eyes. "Oh, c'mon, Sloan. It was just a friendly embrace."

"Friendly, my ass." A memory flashes into my head. The day I found Barbara dead... well, about a half hour before I did. I saw *her* coming out of The Village Coffee Shop, looking disheveled. Of course, she must have been screwing Logan. That's why she was there!

I clench my teeth so hard they may crack. "You've been having an affair with her!"

"I have *not*!"

"I saw her in Maplewood when you were working at The Village Coffee Shop!"

"What!? I never had contact with her until she became a client of the firm!"

"You're lying!"

"I'd *never* lie to you." He looks me in the eye. "Would you ever lie to me?"

I say nothing. The irony is I'm a living lie. "No," I finally say. Yet, another lie.

Growing more exasperated, my husband (for now) palm-slaps his forehead. "You're being ridiculous. She's engaged to one of the partners at the firm. Do you honestly think I'd have an affair with her and risk my career?"

No, he'd never do that. Making partner means too much to him. His puppy-like eyes stay on me.

"... *And* risk my marriage?" His palm still pasted on his forehead, he shakes his head. "God, Sloan, don't you know how much I love you?"

The sincerity in his words makes my glacial heart melt. My voice falters, softens. "Baby, I'm sorry, it just looked like there was something going on. I've not been myself lately. It must be the pregnancy hormones."

His hand flies off his face as his eyes almost pop out of their sockets. I realize what I've said. I've let the cat out of the bag.

"You're pregnant?"

With a nervous smile, I nod. "Yes, that's why I went downtown to your office. I wanted to show you the pregnancy test. Surprise you."

Blinking his eyes several times, he looks stunned, and not in a good way. "But I thought you were on birth control."

"I didn't start taking the pill until after we hooked up the night of the Maplewood book signing."

My gaze stays on him as he does the mental math. "So, you got pregnant that first time we fucked." It's more of a question than a statement. "The baby's almost six weeks old?"

Wordlessly, I nod again. His brows knit together as he registers the headline, life-changing news. He works his jaw before uttering his next words.

"I thought we were going to wait until we started a family."

A feeling of unease washes over me. Bordering on major disappointment. "Are you not happy we're having a baby?"

His expression remains impassive for a few worrisome seconds and then his face lights up like a megawatt bulb. That adorable lopsided smile spreads across his face.

"Of course I'm happy! It's just that I'm so shocked." Beaming, he gestures with his hand. "Get over here, you!"

Slowly, I rise from the couch and pad over to him.

He draws me into his arms and squeezes me against him. It's nothing like the embrace with The Girl in Apartment 5C.

"I'm over the moon happy. I can't believe I'm going to be a dad!"

And me a mom, I say to myself. Thank God, he's not mad at me.

"Do you know what we're having? Is it a boy or a girl?"

For the first time this evening, I smile. "It's way too early to tell. And I'm not sure if I want to find out. Are you okay with keeping it a surprise?"

He agrees to the idea, then kisses me passionately.

"Baby, I love you so much," he whispers against my mouth. "I could never cheat on you. *Never!*"

But you did once...

A shiver of doubt spirals down my spine as the scent of The Girl in Apartment 5C's perfume wafts up my nose. The one that's identical to the one Barbara wore. Two questions whirl in my head.

Why didn't my husband ever tell me that the woman next door was his client?

And what was she doing in Maplewood on the day Barbara was murdered?

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Logan and I celebrate my thirty-first birthday the following week. On Saturday, February 24. Rather than us going out, he prepares a delicious homemade meal. A scrumptious mushroom risotto and endive salad. Calling it his gift to me, he even bakes a cake and decorates it. I tell him I love it, but truthfully, it's a bit creepy. It's shaped like a fetus with flesh-colored frosting and bears two numerical candles, one blue, one pink—a three and a one. 3-1. Thirty-one.

“Sweetheart, make a wish,” he says as he sets the buttercream cake down on the table. The candles flicker.

“Okay.” I smile, already knowing what it is.

Closing my eyes, I make a wish for our baby—that he or she will be healthy and beautiful—and blow both candles out in a single breath. Logan cuts the cake and doles out a massive slice for each of us. I take a bite and want to spit it out. It tastes like cement.

“How does it taste?” he asks cheerfully, clearly enjoying his slice.

“It's delish!” I force a bright smile. Another year. Another lie. But the truth is, I don't want to hurt his feelings, especially since he worked so hard on it. I pick at my piece and instead of vomiting, I manage to blissfully put all my problems to the back of my mind. All my secrets and lies. Worries and fears. At this moment, I couldn't be happier. My marriage is back on track and we're having a baby!

While he's still working long, crazy hours, Logan has been loving and attentive. Making sure I'm eating healthy. Getting enough sleep.

Even giving me yummy foot massages and changing Moo's litter box as a cat's feces can be harmful to pregnant women. I've sworn him to secrecy, for him not to tell a soul about my pregnancy until the end of my first trimester. Better safe than sorry. Because I'm not yet showing, no one knows about it, including my mother. We've nicknamed the baby, *Blip*, and have resisted finding out its sex.

I help Logan clean up. After all the dishes are loaded in the dishwasher, he takes a shower. While I tidy up the kitchen, I notice a stack of mail on the counter. The usual credit card offers and bills, but one of them seems like it might be a greeting card. While stamped, it bears no postmark. My name is typed on one of those clear labels. Using one of the knives my mother bought me, I slice the envelope open and slide out the contents. A smile forms on my lips. It's a birthday card. I bet it's from Mario and he dropped it off. I open the card. It's one of those blank cards where the sender can write whatever they wish. My fingers tremble as I read the block letters:

ENJOY YOUR BIRTHDAY!
IT MAY BE YOUR LAST!

I feel sick to my stomach. Who else knows it's my birthday? I search my brain. Besides my mom and Logan, there's Clarisse, Mario, my primary care physician, my obstetrician, the condo board, and my accountant. My gut tells me that the latter five did not send me this card. That leaves my agent, Clarisse.

Is Clarisse my stalker? And if so, why is she doing this to me? Is it some sick form of intimidation to inspire me to turn in my next book?

I tear up the card and throw it into the trash.

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CHAPTER FIFTY

February and March sail by. No word from my stalker. No words from me.

I asked Mario if he thought Clarisse knew when my birthday was. He snorted and told me she doesn't even know when her mother's is, nor his. Though she's still hounding me for a second book, I've ruled her out as my stalker. The ambitious, self-absorbed businesswoman has no real motive. Seriously, why would she want to kill her bread-and-butter client?

April comes. Monday, the first of April, is like every other day until it isn't. Logan goes to work and I spend most of it in front of my laptop hoping for words to come. They don't. Taking a break, I head downstairs to the mail room to check the mail. It usually comes around three o'clock and sure enough a pile of letters is in our box. After sifting through the junk mail, I come to a business-size envelope. A shiver of dread spills through me. Not only is the postmark from Maplewood, but all the S's have been replaced by X's. The envelope addressed to Mx. Xloan White-Peterxon shakes in my hand. I debate whether to open it or throw it away. Against my better judgment, I tear it open and unfold the single piece of white paper inside. I read it.

*April Foolx is a day
Which comex before the firxt of May.
You can fool your fanx*

*But you can't fool me.
Xtealing a book ix not okay.
Xloan White, you fake...
You're going to PAY!*

I grow unsteady and want to retch. My stalker is back! Again, my first thought is Barbara. That she's still alive and is messing with my head. But, it can't be. I know for a fact she was cremated. Maybe it's someone else who lives in Maplewood. My mind does somersaults and lands on one person. Marc Laroche, the owner of The Village Bookstore. He seems like the nicest of guys, but you know what they say: You can't judge a book by its cover. The more I think about it, the more it's a possibility. Perhaps he became suspect after I spent hours in his shop researching authors similar to Barbara.

Plus, I remember him sneezing that day, telling me he'd come down with a cold the night before. Did he catch it from following me to the dumpster during that freezing blizzardy night? Was he the one who pushed me? With his strong athletic build, he'd certainly have the strength.

And there's this. The email sent to me the morning after Logan and I hooked up. The morning *after* I went back to The Village Bookstore for a signing. It accused me of stealing. Being a sinner. And was sent from someone whose email address was je.sais@gmail.com. I suspected The Girl in Apartment 5C, thinking she might be French. That I don't know for sure, but I do know this: Marc *is* French!

In a frenzy, I hurry back upstairs, the letter in tow. I find my phone and after locating The Village Bookstore in my list of contacts, I stab the call button. Someone picks up on the third ring. My heart hammers.

"*Allo*. The Village Bookstore. Can I help you?"

I recognize the mild-mannered, faintly accented voice instantly. It's Marc.

"Hello, Marc... This is Sloan White..." My voice trails off.

"Sloan!" His voice brightens decibels. "How lovely to hear from you! We can't keep your book on the shelves. It sells out every week. *C'est formidable!*"

Despite my nerves being on edge, I can't help but smile. "That's great to hear."

"So, what can I do for you? If you want to do another signing, I can make that happen. It would be a pleasure to see you again." He pauses. "And, *peut-être*, I could take you out for dinner."

I'm right. He's always had a crush on me. "I'm sorry, Marc. That's not why I'm calling." And then I just blurt it out. Not an accusation, but rather, "I'm married now."

An awkward silence, then finally he breaks it. "Oh... congratulations. Who's the lucky guy?"

A mix of surprise and disappointment laces his voice, but he could be faking it. "Logan Peterson... maybe you remember him. We went to high school together and he worked at The Village Coffee Shop for a while."

"Can't say that I do." He sounds truthful. But all good liars do.

"We're having a baby in September." I instantly regret telling him and don't know why I did when I haven't told a soul.

"I—I guess another congratulations is in order." His voice is unsteady; he sounds down and defeated. Might he have somehow found out and been the one to send me that morbid infant outfit?

"So, what can I do for you?"

I don't know where I'm going with this conversation. "Um, er, I'm writing a new thriller and setting it in Maplewood... it's going to be a true crime story inspired by Barbara Van Wyck's murder."

"Oh." I sense edginess in his voice.

"I'm doing research. Do you think you could answer some questions?"

"Sorry, Sloan. I don't really know much about her and I have a publisher's rep waiting for me." His rushed words are followed by a brief pause. "Hey, congratulations again on everything and call me any time. My offer for the signing stands and I'd love to see you... *Ciao*."

With that we end the call. And I'm not one step closer to figuring out who my stalker is.

Or who killed Barbara Van Wyck.

But Marc Laroche is a definite possibility. I wonder if Detective McGrath questioned him.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

By the middle of April, I'm beginning to show, but I wear clothes that disguise my baby bump. Mostly oversized shirts and sweaters over leggings. I'm physically feeling better, though mentally and emotionally, I'm still a train wreck. Because we were not married by December 31, we're forced to file our taxes separately. I'm shocked by how much I owe the Feds and it only makes me more on edge. There's been no further communication from my stalker, be it Marc or someone else, and I haven't told Logan anything about him or her. He seems to have enough things on his plate than to have to worry about some threats that may mean nothing.

While I'm making a veggie frittata on the last Sunday morning of the month, Logan, in his blue-and-white striped pajamas, sneaks up behind me and wraps his arms around my expanding belly.

"How's Blip doing?" he asks, flutter-kissing my sensitive neck. Turning me on.

He flips me around and lifts me into his strong arms.

While the frittata bakes in the oven, we make glorious love. Me atop the kitchen counter.

Aglow and ravenous, I eat breakfast with him in our dining alcove adjacent to the living room. This is the first time I've been able to stomach eggs, which I've always loved, since I got pregnant. It's weird how pregnancy affects your digestive system and taste buds. Lately, I've had an uncanny craving for weird salty foods—pickles, capers, and seaweed.

Logan, with an espresso, and I, with a cup of decaf, devour the tasty, perfectly baked egg dish. We're both reading the *New York Times*. Me, the *Book Review*, pleased to see that *Black Lies* is still on a bestseller list, though I already knew it would be as Clarisse notified me on Wednesday when it came out online. I shared the good news with Logan and don't bother to show him the list.

My husband is reading the *Arts and Leisure* section.

"Hey, babe. Listen to this. Sotheby's is auctioning off Barbara Van Wyck's estate. Do you want to go?"

He turns the paper so it's facing me. A photo of Barbara tops the paid-for announcement. It's taking place right on the site of her mansion. "It might be fun," he adds after a sip of his espresso.

A chill ripples through me. "Thanks, but no thanks." I swish the remains of my frittata around my plate with my fork. "I honestly never want to set foot in that place again."

My stomach cramps. I don't know if it's a reaction to the eggs or the auction or both.

We finish breakfast, and I clear the table while Logan takes a shower.

As I head back to the living room, a yellow eight by eleven envelope slides under the door. It's so thick it almost gets stuck. I manage to pull it out without damaging it.

There's no address. No postmark. Not even a name. Maybe it's the condo board's annual report.

Remaining calm, I undo the clasp and pull out the contents. I gasp so loudly I'm sure Logan can hear me, and feel myself turn as white as a sheet.

Facing me is the title page of Barbara's manuscript that was curled in the carriage of her Selectric when I found her dead. It shakes like a leaf in my trembling hands.

White Liex
By Barbara Van Wyck

Scrolled on the page is one word, written in what looks like blood-red lipstick...

THIEF!

What's more frightening is that this is not the original page. I ripped that page to shreds and flushed it down the toilet. This is a recreation. Typed on Barbara's Selectric by someone who saw the original page in her red electric typewriter. And watched me steal it along with the rest of the manuscript.

A Xeroxed copy of the first chapter of the book follows. Whoever saw me steal Barbara's manuscript followed me to the dumpster and found all those pages after they flew away.

I need not read them.

Nausea skyrocketing, I dash out the apartment and hurl the envelope and all the pages down the incinerator shoot.

Then, with Logan still in the bathroom, I throw up in the kitchen sink.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

April showers bring May flowers.

At last, spring is really here and the city is abloom with daffodils, cherry blossoms, and fifty shades of green. My baby bump has blossomed, too, and there's no way I can hide it. I've finally told my mother, my agent, and my editor. My mother, who's longed for a grandchild, was overjoyed and couldn't stop gushing. She's already got names picked out be it a girl or boy (her psychic told her it's a boy), and wants to come up from Florida to go baby shopping with me.

My agent, Clarisse, and editor, Ainsley, both single and childless, are less than thrilled. They hope my pregnancy will not get in the way of my next book. I'm already past the deadline. It was due on Tax Day. April 15.

Jokingly, I've told them my "book baby" is coming along and they should have it soon. Truth: I still haven't written a word. And I'm freaking out. Thank goodness, whoever was threatening me seems to have left the planet. I haven't received another menacing note or page of Barbara's manuscript for over a month.

May and June pass by uneventfully. And unproductively. Not a single word. The only thing that's progressed is my pregnancy. Now six months pregnant and into my third trimester, I'm beginning to look like a whale. While I'm constantly tired and now waddle around, I otherwise feel good. Blip seems content growing inside me. With the

baby's persistent kicks, I more and more think Blip is going to be a boy.

On Monday, the second day of July, I'm sitting in front of my computer hoping for words, when my cell phone rings. It's Clarisse. It must her weekly call to find out how I'm doing. Not baby-wise. But book-wise. I pick up on the third ring.

She doesn't give me a chance to say "hi."

"Sloan, I just got a call from Fandom House." Her voice is clipped, her tone serious.

Fandom House is Barbara Van Wyck's longtime prestigious publisher. My heartbeat quickens with excitement. "Oh! They're interested in working with me?"

"Hardly," she bites out.

My excitement morphs into a mixture of confusion and worry. I hold my breath.

She goes on. "There is some concern that you may have plagiarized Barbara Van Wyck's unpublished last novel. A book called *White Lies*."

I suddenly feel the room spinning around me. The floor falling out from under me.

Stop the world, I want to get off.

Turning my head away from the phone so she won't hear me, I suck in a deep breath. It does nothing to calm me. My heart is beating a thousand beats a minute. The phone shakes in my hand and falls to my desk with a clatter.

"Sloan, are you there?" I hear Clarisse ask.

I collect the phone and put it on speaker. "Yes, I'm sorry. I think our connection went bad for a second. I lost you."

She has no idea what I'm experiencing. It's like an alien abduction. "Fandom House would like to have a meeting with us and Forcebooks."

"When?" I ask, managing not to stammer.

"I know it's short notice, but they'd like to meet this afternoon at three."

What?! I think I'm going to have a heart attack, stroke, or really bad outer-body experience. *Think, Sloan, think.* The Queen of Lies comes up with an excuse.

"I—I can't. I have an appointment with my obstetrician I can't miss."

"Reschedule it." A command, her voice as sharp as a tack.

"Sure, I'll do that right after this call."

"Barbara's agent and publisher will both be there as well as an attorney." She pauses briefly. "Do you have one?"

I'm married to one! But I can't bring Logan!

"No, I don't, but I don't think I need one." Am I kidding? I need Alan Dershowitz!

"Fine." My agent stabs the word. "I'll see you this afternoon. I'll text you the address and who to ask for. Don't be late."

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

I'm having a panic attack. I need Xanax. And some whiskey to wash it down.

But I can't have either being pregnant.

I pace my apartment like a madwoman. Clapping my hands to my face. Sweat beading on my forehead and behind my knees. Breathing heavily.

Moo meowing behind me, I end up in the kitchen, willing myself to stay away from the block of knives in my frantic state. Close to hyperventilating, I feed him, then grab a bottled water from the fridge. Twisting the cap off, I thirstily put it to my lips and gulp it down, the water pouring out from the corners of my mouth.

Tossing the empty bottle into the trash, I head back to the living room and look out the window that faces Central Park. On the bustling street below, I notice women all in pretty summer dresses or lightweight power suits.

A thought smacks me in the face. Shit! I have nothing to wear. Nothing appropriate that fits me. All I've been wearing for the past few months are sweats and oversized tops. I may even need new shoes because my feet are swollen from water retention. I can't show up to this meeting in ugly sweats and Uggs.

I need to go shopping. Does T.J. Maxx carry maternity clothes?

A FEW HOURS later I return to my apartment, carrying two shopping bags. Mission accomplished. I found a nice wrap dress at T.J. Maxx and some cute Mary Janes, and at H&M, I found a trendy knit ensemble and a pair of platforms. I try both outfits on, and decide on the dress and Mary Janes. At the last minute, I strap on my black wrist brace to make it look like I've been hard at work writing. Maybe garner a little sympathy. Then, I grab my backpack, dash out of the apartment, and take the hot, smelly subway. I wish I could have cabbed it, but the chance of getting stuck in midtown traffic was too great. I can't be late.

My heart racing, I get downtown just a little before three. While I gave myself plenty of time, wouldn't you know it, my train stalled at the Times Square stop and I had to get out and wait for another one. Thankfully, I wasn't pushed onto the tracks, though maybe that would have been a mixed blessing. Crimes like these have been rampant lately.

Fandom House is located on lower Park Avenue. I half jog, half speed-walk to the building. Sweating from the oppressive heat, I introduce myself at the security desk, giving the security guard both my real name and pen name. Cleared, I run to the elevator banks.

When I get to the thirty-sixth floor conference room, out of breath, Clarisse, in a lime green pantsuit, is already seated at the sleek twenty-seat rectangular table. Sitting next to her is my mousey Forcebooks editor, Ainsley Dearson, and next to her, Oliver Force, the hip, ponytailed, forty-something founder and CEO of my eponymous boutique publisher. To the right of him is his in-house attorney, Harriet Albright, a tough, no-nonsense fifty-something woman, who negotiated my two-book deal with Clarisse. To my disappointment, Clarisse's assistant, Mario, is not with her. He would have made me feel more at ease.

Bottled waters are lined up like bowling pins in the middle of the table, and everyone has their iPads set out.

"Hi," I squeak after catching my breath. I sound like the new kid at school, intimidated and waiting for approval.

No one smiles. No one says "hi" back.

"Um... where would you like me sit?" I ask, my unease rising.

Clarisse signals to the empty chair to the left of hers.

I round the table and as gracefully as possible, lower myself onto the white leather swivel chair. Nervously, I set my backpack on the blond-wood floor beside me. The only device I brought along—my phone—I leave it in my backpack.

Clarisse introduces me to the gentleman sitting across from me. I recognize his name. Randall Johnson. He's the CEO of Fandom House. I've seen his photo in the Business Section of the *New York Times* and online.

"We're just waiting for a few more people," he says. "Unfortunately, Sheila Faust, Barbara's editor, is out of the country, but her literary agent and our counsel will be here shortly."

I dealt with Barbara's agent a lot when I was her PA. Margo Bancroft, the head of the eponymous literary agency. I even met her several times when she came to meet with Barbara at her house. The white-haired Maye Musk look-alike, was as big a bitch as Barbara. Demanding and so arrogant. Like attracts like.

Tense silence fills the sun-drenched room. Anxiously, I gaze out the floor-to-ceiling windows, which offer spectacular views of the city.

I grab a water, take a sip, and then almost choke...

When a chic, lanky, blond woman sweeps into the room carrying a monstrous orange handbag.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Oh my God!

It's the drop-dead gorgeous Girl in Apartment 5C! The one I caught Logan having lunch with. What is she doing here? Don't tell me she's Fandom House's in-house attorney.

The Fandom House CEO introduces her as she gracefully takes a seat next to him. She adjusts her stunning silky red jacket that's draped over her broad shoulders. She wears it like a Wonder Woman cape as if it gives her superpowers.

"Everyone," says Randall, "let me introduce you to Barbara Van Wyck's literary agent, Miranda Huntley."

Huh?

"Hello, everyone," she says frostily. She runs one of her elegant, manicured hands through her perfectly coiffed blond bob. Not a hair out of place, the edges are so sharp you could slice your finger and get a paper cut. Or would that be called a hair cut?

She acts like she doesn't know me as I stare at her. Unnerved and perplexed.

"I thought Barbara's agent was Margo Bancroft," I finally blurt out.

Wearing blood-red matte lipstick that matches her jacket, she smirks at me. "That's my mother. She goes by her maiden name. I've been working with her for the past few years. Unfortunately, she's recovering from surgery and couldn't be here today."

"I hope she's okay," Clarisse says, not a note of sincerity in her saccharine voice. She hates Margo.

Miranda's smile widens. "Oh yes, she's better than new."

Facework!

Miranda pulls out her iPad from her blood-orange Hermès bag. If she recognizes me as the woman who lives in the apartment next door, she still gives no sign. Her icy green eyes don't make contact with mine again.

Shortly afterward, another person walks in. He's a tall, dapper, salt-and-pepper-haired man, in a stunning gray suit, who could be George Clooney's twin brother.

Miranda beams, toying with the big fat diamond on her ring finger. It catches the sunlight that's streaming through the windows.

I've seen him before, but where? It comes to me. He's the handsome man who accompanied Miranda and some other woman—likely her mother—at Tavern on the Green. The night of my wedding dinner.

Miranda stares at him with stars in her eyes. "Everyone, this is Pierce Holloway, who's representing both our agency and Fandom House Publishing on behalf of the late Barbara Van Wyck."

"May she rest in peace," he says, his voice deep and velvety smooth.

An impatient Clarisse glances down at her Apple Watch. "It's three fifteen. Can we please get started?"

"In a minute," retorts Pierce. "I'm just waiting for my associate who had to make a restroom stop."

Clarisse rolls her feline eyes and huffs.

And on my next breath, I almost fall out of my chair.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

“People, this is my associate, Logan Peterson,” announces Pierce Holloway as my husband whips into the conference room, dressed in one of his bespoke suits. On closer inspection, he looks disheveled. His tie crooked. His hair tousled. His forehead lined.

My eyes almost pop out of their sockets. I can’t get my mouth to close. What is he doing here? Then, I remember, he told me that The Girl in Apartment 5C was his client. I never asked him more about her, including her name or profession.

He nervously makes eye contact with me, then sits down next to Pierce, who I bet is the attorney he was referring to when he told me his lunch date was engaged to a law firm partner. More than once, I’ve noticed flirtatious eye exchanges between the silver fox and the half-his-age blonde bombshell.

Clarisse instantly recognizes Logan from our wedding dinner at Tavern on the Green. She leaps to her feet and folds her arms across her chest.

“I find this whole situation totally absurd. Mr. Peterson is my client’s husband!”

My head swims. How the hell could my husband be representing the enemy? Team Barbara. How come he never told me? This, however, is no time for a knock-’em-down marital spat. One, however, might happen tonight. The audacity of him!

Pierce gives Clarisse a look that can kill. “Ms. Young, please sit down and let’s begin.”

The tone of his voice is cold and sharp. He's morphed from being mild-mannered dapper to no-nonsense fierce. Fierce rhymes with Pierce.

My blood pounds in my ears as he presses on. "The reason we are gathered here today is that my clients have found evidence that Sloan White—aka novelist, S.L. Whitman—may have possibly stolen an unpublished book written by their late client, Barbara Van Wyck."

"I did no such thing!" I blurt out, instantly regretful that I didn't keep my big mouth shut.

Clarisse challenges him. "That's preposterous! What proof do you have?"

"Exactly!" thunders Harriet, the Forcebooks in-house attorney.

"Miranda..." Pierce signals for her to respond.

"Well, the strangest thing happened. To backtrack, Ms. Whitman or whatever her name is..."

I bristle at her condescending tone. I want to pull out the blond hairs on her head by their black roots, clump by clump, as she continues.

"... coincidentally happens to live in my building and is, in fact, my neighbor. A few weeks ago, a manila envelope appeared under my door. I opened it and inside were several Xeroxed pages. The prologue of a book. I read them and immediately recognized the font. It was identical to that used by our esteemed, late client, Barbara Van Wyck. She typed all her manuscripts on her IBM Selectric typewriter—what she always and only wrote with—the letter 'X' substituting for the letter 'S', which forever malfunctioned."

I sit ramrod straight, my blood pressure skyrocketing, my gut cramping, hoping I'm not going to miscarry, as she goes on.

"Well, to make a long story short, the pages were very familiar to me. Like I'd read them before. Then it came to me—S.L. Whitman's *Black Lies*." She runs her long, red-lacquered fingernails through her hair. "And before I go on, I should mention, Barbara's book was entitled *White Lies*."

"How do you know that?" jumps in Clarisse.

"I glimpsed the title page in her typewriter when I was at her house for a meeting."

On the day she was murdered.

So that's why she was in Maplewood. I recall my brief encounter with her at The Village Coffee Shop. Her hasty words as she almost plowed into me. *Some people are better off dead.* Could she have strangled Barbara? And what if she'd managed to do so just before I got back to Barbara's house... and was forced to hide in the secret room so I wouldn't discover her? And saw me...

Miranda smacks her blood-red matte lips together and suddenly, I remember the facsimile of Barbara's title page with the word "THIEF" scrolled on it in bright scarlet lipstick. If my memory serves me right, it was the exact shade of red Miranda's wearing. *Did she...*

Harriet stops me in my nebulous thoughts. "Do you have proof?" she asks Miranda.

I hold my breath waiting for her to say she saw me steal Barbara's manuscript with her very own eyes.

I'm doomed!

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Should I make a run for it? Spare myself the humiliation of being found out? Hide under the table? Jump out the window? I can already see the front-page photo of me contorted on the rooftop of a yellow cab lying in a pool of my own blood in tonight's edition of *The New York Post*. The sensational headline:

CAREER SUICIDE!

Book Thief Plunges Thirty Stories to her Death

A hard kick from Blip brings me back to my senses. It's as if my baby is telling me, are you out of your freaking mind? I fix my gaze on Miranda, waiting for her response to Harriet's question.

She takes several sips of her bottled water, then rolls her tongue around her moist lips. What is she waiting for? How hard is it to say yes or no?

She steeples her long fingers, bites down on her bottom lip, then finally moves her mouth.

"No..."

The tiny word sings in my head like an opera note.

"... I don't have proof. Neither a copy of the original title page nor a photo."

Maybe she's lying. She's for sure a smooth operator. Yet, my gut tells me she wasn't hiding in Barbara's secret room. She may have killer business instincts, but I doubt she's actually killed someone. At

least not Barbara. Wouldn't have her long nails made imprints? Even if she was wearing gloves?

Plus, there's no motive. Why would she kill her mother's most prolific and lucrative client? Their gold mine.

She gives another smack of her lips. The annoying habit's getting on my nerves. I want to rip her lips off her face and step on them. Then, watch them deflate like a rubber balloon.

"The encounter wasn't a pleasant one as my client threatened to fire our agency, so I left before things got too heated. It wasn't past Barbara to throw things when she had tantrums."

That's true. Several times while I was working for her, she threw her coffee cup and ashtray at me, incensed that I didn't do exactly what she wished. More proof that Miranda didn't kill her, though if Barbara threatened to drop her and her mother and look for new representation, that might have given her motive. Her long, slender fingers could have easily wrapped around The Barbarian's bony neck.

Miranda locks her eyes with Harriet's. "Let me assure you I will shortly alleviate any concerns you have. Prove that Ms. Whitman stole Barbara Van Wyck's manuscript."

Beneath the table, my legs bounce up and down. I'm not off the hook. With my best poker face, I keep my hands clasped tightly in front of me so no one will see how jittery I am as Miranda perseveres.

"I found Ms. Whitman's book on my Kindle and compared them to the pages that appeared under my door. They were so similar it was frightening."

Pierce the Fierce interrupts her. "Miranda, rather than having you read them out loud, I've had my associate, Logan, make copies for everyone." He looks at my husband. "Logan, can you please pass them out."

He robotically opens his briefcase and retrieves the dozen or so folders, one for each of us, containing the two prologues.

I watch as he passes them out and feel myself pale. My muscles clench. I tell myself to keep my mouth shut. The less I say the better.

Simultaneously, everyone opens their folder and starts reading. The room goes silent. The only sound that fills the air is the flipping

of pages. So intent on reading, no one notices me looking up and gauging their reactions. The faces of Team Sloan go white while those of Team Barbara, seated on the opposite side of the table, grow red. Logan looks up and catches my eye on him. His expression looks pained. Mortified. He reads my face.

You asshole! How could you?

Clarisse is the first to finish. She narrows her eyes at me. "Sloan, I have to say, these two prologues are strikingly similar." She reads the last few lines of both.

Barbara's: "There are many types of lies, she thought to herself. From white to black. She was guilty of all of them. The darkest one. 'Please forgive me, Morgan,' she silently begged."

Mine: "There are many types of lies—from white to red to black. I am guilty of all of them. Even the darkest. 'Please forgive me, Taylor,' I say to myself."

Everyone at the table finishes reading. Gasps fill the room. Clarisse's eyes drill into mine.

"Well, Sloan, can you perhaps explain the striking similarity?" She drums her claw-like nails on the table waiting for me to respond.

I clear my throat. *Stay calm*, I will myself. There's no need to be defensive. I've had time to think this over. Time to come up with the perfect explanation.

Another perfect lie.

"Yes," I say, folding my left hand over my wrist brace for effect. "As you may recall from my acknowledgments, I was Barbara Van Wyck's personal assistant for two years. She mentored me and often asked me for input. To beta read. Just before she was tragically murdered, she had me read the prologue of the new book she was working on. More or less the one you all just read. Having no clue what the book was about, I told her it was chilling. That it really made me want to read more. Sadly, she was strangled before I had the chance. In fact, a day after I read the prologue." I pause and look pointedly at Miranda. "The very day Ms. Huntley paid her a visit."

And possibly killed her!

I take a sip of my water. All eyes stay riveted on me. "After her untimely, tragic death, the words of her prologue stayed with me.

Haunted me. They called out to me. Inspired me to write a story that explored a life of lies.”

Pierce looks at me pointedly. “Who besides you had access to these pages?”

“Maybe her killer...”

I can feel a collective chill in the room.

“... And of course, Ms. Huntley did too.”

Miranda shoots eye daggers at me. Her voice is shrill. “Excuse me? Are you implying something?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Just saying...”

I mentally high five myself. Ha! I’ve rocked her pretty boat.

She opens her mouth to say something, but Clarisse cuts her off. There’s a smug smile on her face. “Well, that settles it. My client was inspired by Barbara and didn’t steal a thing. I would call *Black Lies* an homage to the late great author.”

An homage! I love that word. Yes, that’s what my book is.

Clarisse slips her iPad back into her glossy Gucci briefcase along with the folder. “Now, can we please end this meeting and move on? I, for one, have more important things to do.”

Pierce counters her. “Before we dismiss this case, we need proof that Ms. White wrote the *entire* book by herself. That she didn’t plagiarize it.” He looks my way. “Do you have timestamped drafts of the manuscript on your computer that you could share with us?”

Think, Sloan, think. Make something up. Lie! “Um, sorry, I don’t. The only drafts I have are the original one I sent to Clarisse, the revised one we worked on together, and the subsequent ones addressing notes from my editor, copy editor, and proofreader.”

Well, that’s the truth.

A worried look falls over Clarisse as well as Ainsley, my Forcebooks editor, and Harriet, their in-house attorney. “What happened to the earlier drafts you wrote?” asks Oliver Force, speaking up for the first time.

“During my move to the city, I dropped my laptop and the entire file disappeared.”

“Is that even possible?” asks Randall Johnson, the head of Fandom House.

Pierce pipes up. "I think it is. But you should consult with your IT people. I'll also have Logan consult with a few computer experts."

Without a word, Logan nods. His expression is unreadable. He adjusts his tie.

Pierce again looks my way. "Ms. White, do you have *anything* that can prove you wrote *Black Lies* and that it's an entirely original intellectual property?"

Another lie rolls off my tongue. "Yes. I do."

Pierce tilts his head to one side, a thick brow lifting as if saying, what might that be?

"I have a notebook with all my notes. You know... character names and breakdowns, chapter ideas, possible twists and turns, things to revise and fill in. Even some scribbled-down scenes and lines of dialogue."

"Does it also include a synopsis or an outline?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm a pantser."

"What does that mean?"

I quirk a smile. "It means that once I have the characters and story more or less flushed out in my head, I go to my computer and start typing away, things evolving as I go along. It's a nerve-racking but exciting process. My characters lead the way."

"Barbara, too, was a pantser," comments Miranda.

"One hundred percent," adds Randall, her publisher. "I have no idea how she was able to work out her twisty stories in her head."

Miranda: "My mother found her process so annoying because she couldn't give preliminary notes. But because of Barbara's ongoing success, one blockbuster after another, she couldn't protest or force her to submit outlines. Not even short premises."

I recall I never saw Barbara jotting things down in a notebook, on index cards, or on Post-its. She just sat at her desk in front of her Selectric and typed away. *Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.* Going at it a hundred words a minute.

"I see." Pierce nods pensively. "When can you share your notebook with us, Ms. White?"

"Well, I have to go home and dig it up from the many boxes I have stored in our building's basement. That could take a few hours. And in my pregnant state, I can't overexert myself." I raise my braced

right hand, gingerly twisting it from side to side. "Plus, I have carpal tunnel syndrome."

"Sorry to hear that," says Pierce, showing a bit of compassion.

Thankfully, I don't hear Miranda offering to help. She wouldn't want to sully her designer duds or break a nail.

Her fiancé turns to my husband. "Logan, perhaps you can give her a hand?"

"Um... I can't." Picking at some invisible lint, he hedges and haws. "I've got a defamation trial I need to prepare for and I'm behind."

All the better. The last thing I need is his help on a wild goose chase.

"No worries," I tell Pierce with a reassuring smile. "I can handle it. I'll figure it out and have the notebook to you by noon tomorrow. Fingers crossed it wasn't destroyed by the flood from a pipe burst last month."

"Fingers crossed," Clarisse quips.

Pierce seems satisfied. The meeting is adjourned. Logan dashes out of the conference room before I can confront him.

It's just as well. I have a boatload of work to do.

I'll deal with him later. Bottle up my rage.

My career is on the line. And so is my life.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

My blood pulsing with urgency, I hurry out of the office building. I look over my shoulder to make sure no one is following me.

What great luck! There's a Staples right across the street. The walk sign in my favor, I cross with a horde of pedestrians, all scurrying to get to their next destination. New Yorkers always seem to be in a rush. Never slowing down to smell the roses, though this area of the city is not known for its lush parks.

Fifteen short minutes later, I'm charging out the office supply store with a plastic Staples bag, filled with a thick, five-subject spiral notebook, a box of mechanical lead pencils, and some Post-its. In retrospect, I should have been more environmentally conscious, and loaded them into my canvas backpack. Okay, next time, I promise the green gods.

As I march to the subway station, I pass a Starbucks. Rather than going back to my apartment and wasting time, I decide that the coffee depot will be a perfect place for my machination. And I won't have to deal with Logan. Let him see what I have planned. Which could be cold-blooded murder.

Right now, I hate him so much I could kill him.

After ordering a decaf latte and purchasing a raw veggie/hummus snack, I find a table and slip out my notebook and the box of pencils from the Staples bag.

With a pencil, I label the five divided sections:

Story ideas

Characters

Chapters

Revisions

Agents

I start jotting things down at breakneck speed.

Scribbling and erasing things. Adding notes in the margins as well as some Post-its. So it looks authentic.

A bit of my coffee spills onto one of the pages. At first, I'm irked, but it gives me an idea.

To make this notebook look more authentic, it should have stains, folded pages, and cover creases. Consuming another hot beverage and messy snack, I spend the next couple of hours scribbling words and marking up the spiral notebook pages with food and beverage stains, cross-outs, and erasures. I bend the cover to give it some creases. Some age. LOL! I should have been a mixed media artist. Or a con artist. Which maybe I am.

Going on seven p.m., I'm exhausted. Stuffed. And brain dead.

I call for an Uber and the reality I've been stifling kicks in.

I'm going to have to confront Logan.

As I settle in the car, Blip gives a hard kick.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Exhausted, I arrive home. Thankfully, Logan's not there. I change into sweats, a pair which I pull out from the hamper. They smell musty and sweaty. Like I've been digging through boxes in the dark, dank basement for hours, in search of the notebook. In the kitchen, I add a few more food and beverage stains to the filled-up lined pages. Scattered drops of red wine, some greasy vegetable oil, and some ketchup. Then earmark several corners for good measure. I then hide the notebook in the living room under one of the couch cushions. So far, that's been a good hiding place.

Moo meows against my legs, and I feed him on the kitchen counter. Wishing I could pour myself some wine, I make some tea. The kettle whistles, and I pour the steaming hot water over my tea bag. With my mug, I return to the living room and relax with a magazine. Waiting for my husband (for now) to come home. The hours pass. The sky darkens. What's taking so long?

Finally, going on ten o'clock, the apartment door slams open. And shut.

Logan.

Still in his suit and tie, he looks disheveled. His hair tousled as if he's been caught in a windstorm. His cheeks flushed as if he's drunk too much. His eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, almost as if he's been crying.

The rage I've been holding back bursts out like a champagne cork.

"How could you?" I lash out as he ambles to the bar.

He stops in his tracks before pouring himself a drink and spins around.

"Baby, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

He looks at me pleadingly. He *is* crying!

His tears unnerve me. I've never seen him shed any.

My voice softens. "I just don't understand how you could have represented Barbara's agent and publisher and not protected me. You betrayed me."

He falters. "I had no choice. Pierce Holloway wanted me on the case. He knew you were my wife, but he didn't care. His manipulative, honey pot fiancée, Miranda, begged him."

The mention of her name makes me bristle. Despite the fact that less than an hour ago, I wanted to kill him or at least throw plates at him, I let him go on.

He brushes away his tears with the cuff of a sleeve. Seeing him cry makes me think of the quirky, confused little boy I grew up with. The one I wrote silly poems with. The one I had a secret crush on. The one I wanted to lose my virginity with, but someone beat me to it. I shake that heartbreaking memory away and stay in the moment.

"I couldn't say no." His voice quivers. "Holloway said if I turned down his request to work the case, I'd not make partner."

The tone of my voice grows angry again. "So, making partner was more important to you than me and our marriage?"

He shakes his head. "Sloan, sweetheart, nothing is more important to me than you and our baby. I made a terrible mistake."

"You can't take it back. The damage is done."

My own words frighten me. Am I implying that I want to end our marriage? Get a divorce?

He inhales a deep, fortifying breath. So deep his chest puffs out. The tears dry up.

"Baby, I quit."

I flinch. "What do you mean?"

"I officially resigned from Straub Holloway." He unbuttons the collar of his shirt and loosens his tie. A symbolic gesture? "Today was my last day."

"What?!" I'm shocked. So shocked I can't get another word out.

"I feel like a total shit for what I did. Moreover, I don't want to spend another day of my life billing hours, working twenty-four seven, and climbing the corporate ladder. Doing unethical things to get to the top. It's killing me. Killing us."

"I thought you wanted to make partner."

"Partner, my ass. I'd like to burn Straub Holloway down and see them all roast. They made my life a living hell."

"Logan," I say, my voice now again soft and compassionate, "what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what I've always wanted to do. Write... like you."

"But..."

He cuts me off and I'm glad because I didn't really know what I was going to say.

"Sloan, baby, we'll make ends meet. I'll drive an Uber if I have to. Check out grocery bags at Trader Joe's. Or be that guy who washes your windshield for a buck."

My heart is breaking for him. I'm living my dream, though it's a bit of a nightmare at the moment, and he has the right to live his. I need to believe in him. Believe in us.

"We're going to be okay, my love." My voice is watery. "By the way, good news. I found my notebook with all my *Black Lies* notes."

A half-lie? Do those exist?

"That's awesome." For the first time today, my husband quirks a small, crooked smile. Just big enough for his adorable dimple to make a little dent in his left cheek. It totally melts me.

I rise to my feet and a powerful, magnetic force pulls us together. He draws me into his strong arms and kisses me everywhere he can.

"I love you so much," he breathes out. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I already have," I reply, tearing his clothes off.

Right on the living room floor, we make the most passionate love we've ever made. Epic sex that leaves us spent and breathless.

"Baby," he says when he recovers, "I have an idea."

I run circles with my fingers around his bare chest. "What?"

"Let's go away tomorrow."

"But what about my notebook?"

"No worries. We'll drop it off in the morning, then go on a road trip. We've never gone away together."

That's true. We didn't even go on a short honeymoon.

"A babymoon?" I smile.

"What's that?"

"A romantic getaway couples take before the birth of their baby."

He laughs. "That's funny, but I'm viewing it more as a retreat. To rekindle, recharge, reconnect."

"A writer's retreat!" I beam.

"Exactly!"

He kisses me and mounts me once again.

Moo meows.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

After a night of mind-blowing sex, Logan and I wake up early and pack.

"Where are we going?" I ask, as I toss some freshly washed sweats into my suitcase.

"It's a surprise," he says with a wicked glint in his eyes.

"Do I need to pack a bathing suit?" Inwardly, I cringe. The last thing I want is to be seen in public in a swimsuit with my baby bump and big butt.

"Nah."

I silently sigh with relief.

"Anything fancy?"

"Nope."

I'm glad about that, too, because the only dressy outfits I have that fit me are the two I bought yesterday for the meeting. I'm going to return the one I didn't wear, and give away the one I did. I never want to wear it again. It's nothing but an ugly, bad memory I want to forget.

"For how long will we be away?"

He folds some jeans into his suitcase. "I'm not sure. Maybe a few days. Maybe longer. It depends."

I look at him. "Depends on what?"

He smiles. "On you."

Me?

“Don’t forget to bring your laptop... and your wrist brace,” he says before I can ask what he means by that. “I think you’re going to get inspired.”

“I hope the same for you.” My beloved husband. The aspiring writer.

As I pack a small bag of toiletries, a sudden unsettling thought hits me. “What about Moo?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve taken care of it. The Super will come up to the apartment twice daily to feed him and make sure he has water. He’ll also change his litter box every day. I slipped him a hundred-dollar bill and told him not to open the windows.”

I peck a kiss on his cheek. He’s thought of everything.

We finish packing, take a shower together, and make breakfast. I leave Moo some food and water.

By nine o’clock, we’re in Logan’s Ford pickup. It’s hard to believe he still has old Bessie. He keeps it parked in a garage in Washington Heights, a neighborhood north of Harlem. I asked him once why he’s kept the truck all these years and he told me, “It makes me remember.” His voice clipped, he left it at that, leaving me no room to probe.

I reminisce the last time I was in it as we head downtown to drop off my notebook. Food stains and all. It was Christmas Day, over a year and half ago, when Logan drove me to the hospital for my broken wrist. The day I knew I was in love with him all over again.

My ruminations halt when we reach the towering glass and steel building on Park Avenue and 55th Street, housing the law offices of Straub Holloway. Surrounded by a sea of black limos and high-end cars, Logan’s derelict blue truck sticks out like a sore thumb.

He double parks in front of the building and lets me out, the notebook tucked under my arm. Five minutes later, I’m back in the truck. Feeling so much lighter. Like I’ve shed all my baby weight. The proof of the pudding is on them. I’ve fulfilled my obligation.

Taking off, we make one stop at the Trader Joe’s in the East Village to pick up some groceries.

“Are we going to some remote hideaway?” I ask as we load the six (!) bags of groceries into the back of the truck.

“Something way better.”

We go through the Holland Tunnel and emerge on the Jersey Turnpike. It's ugly and it stinks. When I was a kid, I always held my nose whenever we travelled this route. Only ten minutes in, I need to pee. Pregnancy wreaks havoc on your bladder.

"Sweetie, I need to use a bathroom," I tell Logan.

He keeps his eye on the road. "Okay, next gas station we see, we'll stop. I need to fill up anyway."

A few exits later, we find a Shell station. I use the bathroom while Logan pumps gas. As I sit down on the toilet, my phone pings. It has to be my mother. I slip it out of my pocket and glance down at the message. It's from Detective McGrath. The text is brief:

Call me ASAP.

I'll call him later. When we reach our destination. Why should I let him mess up my little vacation so early on?

After relieving myself, I return to the pickup, and hop into my seat. I notice the gas tank is filled. We must be going quite a distance.

"Can't you tell me where we're going?" I ask, buckling myself in which isn't easy or comfortable with my baby bump. "Please? Pretty please?"

I wonder: is it Atlantic City or the Poconos? A log cabin in the mountain resort region would make an ideal writing retreat and would be romantic too.

He chuckles. "That would ruin the surprise. Now, close your eyes," he orders in that domineering alpha voice I've heard before.

"Why?"

"Just do as I ask."

Obediently, I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Good girl," he says as I feel him wrap a silky blindfold around them. He ties it tight. Too tight. It hurts.

"Why do I need to wear this?" I ask, unable to see a thing. Does he have some kinky fun in mind now that he's liberated from his oppressive law firm? My skin prickles at that thought.

"So you won't figure out where we're going," he tells me. "Promise me you won't take it off."

“Promise. Girl’s Scout Honor.” I mentally roll my eyes. Nerd girl me was never a Girl Scout.

He starts up the engine and the truck begins to move again.

“Are you thirsty?” he asks.

“Very.”

I hear him pop the lid of one of the Hansen’s sodas we bought at Trader Joe’s. He hands me the can and then blasts the radio.

Jersey homeboy, Bruce Springsteen’s “My Hometown” is playing. I love that song. We both join in, singing at the top of our lungs.

Next up, Springsteen’s “Jersey Girl.” It’s a soft, melodic ballad.

I guzzle the entire can of soda, and as I sing along, my voice starts fading. The lyrics are getting garbled. Sleep is overtaking me. It must be the damn pregnancy hormones.

“Honey, I think I’m going to take a nap,” I tell Logan, my eyes heavy, my words slurring.

I feel like I’m floating. In some kind of limbo.

“Go for it. Close your eyes.” His voice is sweet and cajoling. “When you wake up, we’ll be there.”

CHAPTER SIXTY

I'm trapped in a living hell. Or a horror movie. Chained to the ground. Red-hot flames surround me, and in a circle of gold leaf mirrors, holograms of Barbara Van Wyck magically appear. Her frightening face looks like a theatrical mask, reminding me of the Evil Queen from Disney's Snow White. Her skin ghost-white, her eyes glowing green. A black Hermès scarf is tied around her bald head and atop of it sits a spiky gold crown.

The flames reflect in the smoky glass. Everywhere I look I see Barbara.

Barbara, Barbara, Barbara.

Scowling at me. Her blood-red lips pursed. Her eyes narrowed. The clatter of her typewriter keys mixing with the crackle of the angry flames. Her husky voice bombards me and echoes in the darkness. Bouncing off the fiery walls.

"Sloan White, I know what you did," she hisses in one of the mirrors.

Then, in another and another...

"You stole my book from me."

"You tried to steal my crown."

"No one steals from the Queen of Suspense."

"What do you want?" I cry out, the heat of the flames scorching my skin.

"There's nothing I want. You can't give me back my life."

"But I didn't kill you."

"You robbed me of my soul."

"What can I do to make it up to you? Please tell me. Show me the way out of this living hell."

She grows more enraged. "There's nothing you can do. Sloan White, you need to pay!"

All at once, the oval mirrors fly off the walls, and come at me like a whirling dervish. Smashing into each other. The gilded frames cracking. The glass exploding into a million pieces. Smoke, shards, and flames everywhere. A noxious fume. Burning my lungs. I can't shield myself. I can't escape. I'm chained.

"NOOOOOOO!" I scream as her multiple voices cackle like a Greek chorus.

"PAAAAAY!"

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PART 3

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CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Bathed in a sheet of cold sweat, I awaken from my nightmare, but I can't blink my eyes open. They're glued shut. Something's tightly wrapped around them. I remember. Logan's blindfold. All I can see behind my eyelids is fiery darkness.

I'm flat on my back, lying on a hard surface. It feels like a wood floor.

I have a banging headache. My brain spins.

My body aches.

I feel dizzy and nauseous.

Every limb feels like lead.

I try to lift my arm, but am only able to get as far as my leg.

Beneath my clammy palm I can feel my sweats. They're damp with perspiration. I think I'm still in the same clothes I left our apartment in.

My right hand slithers up my thigh, making its way to my belly.

Beneath my hoodie, I feel my baby bump. Hard and round. I keep my hand cupped on it, waiting for a sign that my baby's okay. Nothing stirs. Not one little kick.

My greatest fear claws at me. That something has happened to my baby. My heart hammers as my hand climbs up my torso, passing over my engorged breasts, until it gets to my sweat-laced face. I try to slide off the tight, silky blindfold, but I don't have the strength to lower it or undo the knot. And my hands are trembling too much. A million questions spin in my head.

Where am I?
What time of day is it?
What day is it?
How long have I been here?
What's happened?
Am I okay? Is my baby okay?
Where's my husband? Is he okay?
Panic grips me like a vise. It hurts to think.

My mouth is parched, my tongue, like sandpaper, stuck to my palate. I swallow twice to activate my saliva. Moisten my mouth. Unglue my tongue. My throat feels like I've gorged myself on barbwire. I desperately need water.

I then take several restorative breaths, breathing in through my nose, out through my mouth, trying to clear my fuzzy head. The air smells musty and dusty. A brain cloud lifts. The last things I remember is driving with Logan in his Ford pickup, drinking a can of soda, listening to Springsteen, getting a text earlier from McGrath and not responding. I think I fell asleep. Then what?

"Logan," I call out frantically at the top of my lungs. "Where are you?"

No response.

My imagination runs wild. A horrific thought assaults me.

Did we stop somewhere and were kidnapped? By a cult that's holding us prisoner? Or by some madman who's holding us captive for ransom?

"Logan!!" I cry out again, my voice hoarse with desperation.

"LOGAN!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

I feel tears of sorrow and despair gather behind the blindfold. They, too, can't escape.

I begin to sob. Loud, shuddery sobs that rock my aching body, hurt my head. Maybe someone will hear me. Come to my rescue.

Suddenly, I feel a familiar sensation inside my belly. The sharp pain I love. A kick! It's our baby! I've woken Blip up. I put a hand to my tummy and feel another fierce kick. It's all I need to kickstart me. Knowing my child inside me is alive, a survivor, a warrior, I find the strength to sit up. I tug at my tear-soaked blindfold and manage to lift it up. I blink my freed eyes several times, but I'm still shrouded in utter darkness. Wherever I am is windowless. That and the dampness makes me think it's a basement. My world is silent except for my shallow breaths.

Not yet having the wherewithal to standup—I still feel dizzy and nauseous—I remain seated and curl my knees to my chest, folding my arms around them. I resist the urge to sob again and instead get down on all fours and inch around the room in search of a way out. Holding myself up high enough so my baby bump doesn't skim the floor. The wood planks are rough and scarred. Wherever I am must be old.

I immediately encounter an obstacle. It's a hardcovered book. Then I run into another and another. The whole floor must be covered with books. Am I in the basement of an old library? A mildewy odor saturates the air. I could be, but where?

I have no sense of time. Or place. My bag with my phone is gone. Then, I remember my old digital watch, the one hidden beneath the sleeve of my hoodie. It's like the pink Energizer Bunny. Glowing in the dark and still going after all these years. I vow I'm never going to replace it if I survive this ordeal.

I glance down at the watch. It's Tuesday, July 3. The time: 10:31 a.m. I do some mental calculations. McGrath texted me at about the same time yesterday morning. That means I've been trapped here, lying unconscious, for twenty-four hours. How far from Manhattan am I?

I find my way to a wall. Staying close to it, I crawl around the perimeter of the room, patting the plaster in search of a door. My eyes are wide open but unseeing in the pitch black. A mixture of hope and despair fills every fiber of my being.

I count the corners as I crawl around the room. It's large, larger than I imagined, and it takes me several knee-pounding minutes to get back to where I started. My heart sinks to my stomach; tears well up in my eyes. There's no door. No way out. I'll be trapped here forever, maybe die here of starvation and dehydration—my poor baby!—when on my next strangled breath, a ray of light fills the room.

Before me, a door to another room creaks open.

My heart freezes. I hold my breath.

Someone is standing at the doorway, looming above me.

Is it my captor? The police?

Squinting, I gaze up at the tall, imposing, all-in-black figure.

I don't know whether to jump for joy or recoil in horror.

Oh my God. It's...

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

“Logan!” I croak, so happy to see him I could cry.

You’d think he’d be as happy to see me as I am him, but his face is impassive. He doesn’t move. Not even the bat of an eye.

My eyes pan up his fit, muscular body. It takes up the space of the doorway. His legs straddled, his arms crossed. A pyramid of strength and beauty. Showing no signs of physical abuse, he’s dressed in head-to-toe black. Black jeans, a long-sleeve hoodie, and the Nikes he was wearing yesterday. But he’s oddly added black leather gloves and a black knit ski mask that covers his head and neck. It has three openings—two for his eyes and one for his mouth. He looks like a bank robber.

“Baby, I’m so happy to see you,” I rasp, tears in my voice.

Wordlessly, he just stands there. Ramrod straight, like a pillar. I long to be in the safety of his arms. Why isn’t he lifting me to my feet? Hugging me? Asking me if I’m okay?

There’s no twinkle in his eye. Nor any smile lines around them. He gazes down at me coldly, his orbs dark and wild.

“Logan, what’s going on? Where are we? Is this some kind of game? If it is, it’s not funny!”

He says nothing and beams a flashlight at me. It blinds me. I shield my eyes with my hand and look away.

“Logan, please put that thing away. And help me up.”

He holds on to it, keeps it on me.

“Get. Up.”

His voice is beyond alpha. It's cruel and frightening. Demonic. What's wrong with him? My mind jumps to my cult kidnapping theory. Have they already brainwashed him?

"Get. Up," he repeats, his voice louder and harsher.

Shaking, I try to scramble to my feet, but my brain and legs are not in sync. My muscles are too weak, my brain still in a haze.

"Get. Up!" he barks again.

"L-Logan, I can't," I whimper. "I think I've been drugged."

He sneers at me, then painfully jerks me up to my feet by my ponytail. I wince.

"Good guess!" he snickers. "Yes, my dear, you have."

He looks and sounds so sinister. How does he so unerringly know I've been drugged?

"Did you drug me?" I rasp in a state of disbelief.

He smiles smugly. "Another good guess. Score two for you."

Fear tugs at me. "What did you drug me with?" *And why?*

"A roofie."

"Huh?"

"Rohypnol, you stupid bitch."

The date-rape drug? Known to be tasteless, odorless, and easily dissolvable in carbonated beverages. He must have slipped it into my soda while I was blindfolded.

A horrific thought plows into me. My hand jumps to my baby bump. Will it have a harmful effect on my unborn baby?

"Don't worry," he says as if he's read my mind. "I only slipped you a half-tablet. You needn't be concerned about any long-term consequences."

What does he mean by that? Is he insinuating that he's going to kill me and my baby?

As a head-to-toe shiver skitters down my spine, he flicks a light switch. Around the room leaded-glass wall sconces come to life.

I blink several times. My eyes adjusting to the lights.

I recognize them.

I know where I am!

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

We're at Evergreen! Barbara Van Wyck's deserted mansion. Logan's standing in her office, me in the secret room—the nursery—behind it. Though the furnishings are gone, I recognize the room beyond a shadow of a doubt.

What are we doing here? I'm about to ask my husband when he yanks off what was my blindfold and scrunches it one hand.

I eye it. It's one of Barbara's Hermès silk scarves. The one with the horseshoe pattern. I remember it well. He stuffs it into a pocket.

"Move it!" With a sharp jut of his chin, he signals me to head into Barbara's office.

"Logan, what's going on? Why are we here?" And how does he know about the secret room? I ask myself silently.

His venomous eyes bore into mine. "Stop asking questions. Speak only when spoken to."

Speak only when spoken to. One of The Barbarian's signature lines. How does he know it?

I don't move. Not even an inch. I look at him imploringly. "Please, Logan! Tell me what's going on."

He sneers. "What part of 'move it' don't you get?"

I don't answer him. A mixture of confusion and fear surges inside me.

He scrunches up his face like a fist. "Does this help?"

Before I can take my next breath, he whacks the metal flashlight across my shoulder. So hard, he could have cracked a bone.

I cry out in agony as he hurls the flashlight across the nursery.
The pain's so great, I can't form words.

On my next ragged breath, he pulls out something from his back pocket.

"Does *this* help?" he asks.

He points the metal object at me.

It's a gun!

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

With Logan close behind me, pointing the gun at my back, I stumble into Barbara's former office. A feeling I can't put into words comes over me. Maybe it's her presence. Whatever it is gives me chills. Beneath my hoodie, goose bumps sprout on my arms.

My eyes scan the room. It's not how I remember it. Most of the furniture and decorations are gone. All that remains are the corner table and chair I used to work at, and on the other side of the room, her ormolu desk and velvet throne chair. Along with her red Selectric typewriter, they are exactly where they used to be. Her built-in bookshelf is now empty except for the old *Roget's Thesaurus* that opens the secret door. The rest of the books have been strewn all over the adjacent nursery floor. As much danger as I'm in, a wave of sadness falls over me when I think about my husband abusing all these books. Tossing a book on the floor is almost as bad as throwing it out. Or burning it.

Or stealing it.

"Where do you want me to go?" I ask Logan, not looking back at him over my shoulder.

"Good question!" he says. "Sit at Barbara's desk... but wait. Put these on."

A minute later, I'm clad in Barbara's black mink coat and one of her Hermès scarves is tied around my head. The dank smell of the fur nauseates me. The familiar stink of tobacco and booze.

Logan chuckles. "You look good. Luxury becomes you."

Repulsed, I try to shrug the coat off.

"Don't!" barks Logan. "Unless you want to become a legend too."

The words of that famous Blackglama ad campaign swirl around in my brain. No, I don't want to become a legend. I want to live.

So, I do as he asks and take a seat at Barbara's desk. In her majestic throne chair. It feels so strange to be sitting here. Almost surreal. It's like the red Selectric embodies Barbara's spirit and it's entering me though every crevice of my being, every pelt of the fur. Shivering, I notice there's a blank piece of paper in the carriage.

"Logan, why are you doing this?" I ask, now facing him and the gun.

Has he been brainwashed by the cult who could be hiding out upstairs or in the basement? Or had some kind of psychotic break? Or could he be on drugs? Could quitting his job have totally messed him up?

"You'll find out soon." I can hear the smirk in his voice.

Whatever the reason is, I need to escape him. Both my life and my baby's are at stake. It kicks again. *Stay calm, my little Blip*, I silently tell my gender-neutral baby.

An idea comes to me.

"Logan, I really need to pee." That's the truth. I haven't peed since the gas station stop and that was over twenty-four hours ago. Given my pregnant state, I'm lucky I haven't peed myself.

"Fine." He stabs the word at me.

"Get going. You know where the guest bathroom is." He pauses. "I'll be right behind you so don't do anything stupid."

Shit. I didn't count on that. I shuffle down the hallway, my brain spinning with options.

"I'll be right here," he says as I enter the bathroom and attempt to lock the door behind me.

"Stop fooling around with the lock," I hear Logan say through the thick slab of wood. "I fixed it so it won't work. Just take a piss and get the hell out."

My shoulders sagging, I sit down on the toilet and relieve myself. My flow is so forceful I'm sure it can be heard across the Atlantic.

"I also have to do a poop," I yell, giving myself more time to figure out my options. A possible escape plan.

"Fine. Just don't take your sweet time," he replies in that menacing voice.

There's a window above the toilet. Maybe I can squeeze through it.

Fat chance given my baby bump and weakened state. But it's worth a shot. It's the only chance I've got.

Rising, I flush the toilet so he won't hear me, then quietly lower the toilet seat and climb onto it. I open the window as far as it can go and heft myself up. I make it halfway through the opening with my baby bump and the fur... then can't budge, not even an inch. Shit. I should have taken off the bulky coat. I'm stuck!

"What's going on in there?" Logan yells. "What's taking so long?"

There's only one thing I can do... I scream for help at the top of my lungs.

"Help! Somebody help me! HELP!"

Except no one will hear me because there's not another house close to Barbara's and my voice is so ragged.

"Hel—" I croak out again, but before I can finish saying it, the door to the bathroom slams open and Logan stampedes inside.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you crazy bitch?" He yanks me out of the window, not caring about our baby. Steadying me on my feet, he slaps me hard across the face.

I turn my head to the side, wincing from the sting. Yanking my loose ponytail, he turns me to face him. His face is red with rage. I've never seen him so angry. It frightens me.

He glowers at me, his voice filled with vitriol. "Don't you ever try something like that again! Understand?"

Speak only when spoken to. "Y-yes," I stammer, nodding like one of those bobblehead dolls.

He shoves me toward the bathroom door. "Let's go. You have work to do."

I shudder. What does he have in mind?

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

I'm back at Barbara's desk. I'm surprised Logan hasn't tied me to the chair. I try to swallow back my fear, but it's so hard to swallow past the fireball in my throat.

"Logan," I rasp, not caring if I've not been spoken to. My throat is so sore, my mouth so dry, I can barely talk. "I desperately need some water."

Facing me, he's seated across the room at my former workstation, except he's dragged the chair to the side of the table. Still wearing the wool ski mask, he glares at me, without an ounce of compassion. The gun planted on his crotch, he digs into a Trader Joe's bag by his feet. He pulls out a can of beer. Snapping the tab, he tilts his head back and knocks it down. His Adam's apple bobs beneath the mask with each successive gulp. It's as if he wants to torture me.

"Please, Logan," I beg. "I need some water."

He takes another slug of the beer, then lets out a giant burp.

"Fine." He reaches back inside the bag and pulls out a bottled water.

"Catch it, babe, and you keep it!"

Before I can blink, he tosses it across the room at me. To my amazement, I catch it with both hands. I was never a good catch. Either with a ball or with men. I question now how I landed up with Logan. Was there something he was after?

"Nice catch," he says with a smirk as I unscrew the bottle cap. I thirstily put the bottle to my mouth and gulp down the water, not caring that it's dribbling all over my chin and onto Barbara's mink. It feels so good. In a matter of seconds, I drain it.

He takes a few more chugs of his beer. "Hungry?" he asks.

As if on cue, my stomach growls. "Yes, very."

He reaches back inside the bag. This time he pulls out a chicken wrap that we picked up. He tosses it my way. It lands on Barbara's Louis the Whoey desk. I snag it and peel off the Saran Wrap from the package. I bite into the rolled-up sandwich. I'm so famished it tastes like the best thing I've ever eaten.

"Thank you," I mumble between bites.

"Enjoy." He snickers as if it's the last thing I'll ever eat.

My eyes stay on him as he grabs a sandwich for himself. He takes a large manly bite and swallows. "So, wifey dear, I bet you have some questions for me."

Some? More like a gazillion. I ask the first one that comes to mind.

"Why did you bring me here?"

Another bite. "You'll find out in due time."

Another question. "How did you get inside Barbara's house?"

He smirks again. "Easy-peasy." He reaches inside a pocket and dangles familiar metal objects. They clink together. "I have the keys."

My squiggly brows lift, begging for more information.

"Aunt Prissy gave me a set."

Aunt Prissy... Barbara's housekeeper, Priscilla... Logan's aunt.

"You know, I've been here before," he says in a matter-of-fact tone. All ears, I listen.

His face hardens. "If your sycophants knew the fake you are, they'd lynch you."

I feel the color drain from my face. "W-what do you mean?"

"Oh, c'mon, Sloan! I saw you steal Mommy dearest's manuscript."

His words clog my brain. There's too much to process. One question leads to another. Like a chain reaction.

Barbara Van Wyck is *his* real mother? *He* was hiding in the secret room and saw me steal her manuscript through the peephole? Does

that mean *he* was the one who murdered her?

How is all this possible? I search my mind. Recreate that life-changing day. Retrace my footsteps.

When I went back to The Village Coffee Shop for a second time to get Barbara her espressos, Logan was no longer there. I was told he was on his lunch break... just enough time for him to drive his pickup to Barbara's mansion and kill her. He had the keys.

The pieces of the puzzle are coming together. I ask him for another water.

"Okay, but this is your last one. Savor it. Make it last." He throws another bottle my way and I manage to catch it. Well, barely. My mind is so boggled.

So, if I heard right and am correct, Logan is Barbara's son. Priscilla lied to me. Barbara's baby—a boy, not a girl as I thought—didn't die from sudden crib death. Did Priscilla secretly steal the baby and give him to her infertile, impoverished twin sister?

Strengthened by the sandwich and water, I ask Logan directly.

Guzzling his beer, he laughs. "Good ol' Aunt Prissy would *never* commit a crime."

He finishes his beer and then squishes the aluminum can in his gloved hand before hurling it across the room. Clanking on the wood floor, it narrowly misses me.

His face darkens. His nostrils flare. "The bitch abandoned me. Gave me up. She *never* wanted me."

More questions bombard me. Who fathered him? Was it in an act of passion? Or a fit of madness? And what happened to him?

But that's not what I ask. "Is that why you murdered Barbara?"

He fiddles with the gun on his lap. "Partly. The old harpy deserved to die. She ruined my life and destroyed my parents."

A confession! My husband is a murderer!

My heart in my throat, I let him go on.

"You think it was easy growing up in Maplewood with all those snotty rich kids who shopped at the fancy Short Hills mall and drove their own brand-new car or borrowed their parents' Mercedes?"

Logan grew up poor in a small, run-down apartment on the wrong side of town. The seedy part of Maplewood that borders crime-ridden Newark. While I didn't grow up rich, we lived in a nice middle-class

house on a pretty street. Despite my annoying parents, my life was always so much better than his. His hardworking parents could never catch a break, I remember as he reminisces.

"My mom—the one I grew up with—took me to Goodwill in our beat-up Pinto whenever she had a little extra money. And every time my dad was let go, I helped make ends meet by working odd jobs after school."

I remember some of them... Washing windows... delivering groceries... always the one who shoveled snow. Sometimes I helped him. Another opportunity to be together.

"I had dreams," he continues, looking at me. "Do you remember?"

I nod. Like me, he was an avid reader. We hung out together at the library. Books transported us to faraway places and imaginary worlds. He, too, wanted to be an author. A rich and famous one... like R.L. Stine, J.K. Rowling, and Maplewood's very own, Barbara Van Wyck.

"Yes, you wanted to be a writer." *Like me.* It was one of the reasons we were so connected. Our intellectual chemistry preceded our physical chemistry.

He snorts. "Good memory, she who steals books."

It's hard to ignore the dig. It hurts. I bite down on my bottom lip. That hurts too.

"You know, I *really* wanted to win the Stratemeyer Scholarship." *The one I won.* "And have gotten a full ride to Hampshire's creative writing program."

I flinch. "You did? I didn't know that."

"I never told you." A beat. "I applied too."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He sniggers. "Why would I have? You wanted it as much as I did."

"But I told you I was applying for it. Why didn't you tell me you were too?"

"I regrettably liked you too much."

My heart squeezes. "Logan, I feel terrible. If I'd known..." My voice trails off.

"If you'd known, would you have *not* applied? Or have withdrawn your application? His voice imperceptibly darkens, but I notice.

That's what writers do. Their eyes and ears are like antennae.

I remain silent, contemplating my answer as he seethes.

"ANSWER ME!"

"Honestly, I don't know..."

"Bullshit. It was all you ever talked about... dream stealer!"

He's right. The truth is I wouldn't have withdrawn my application, no matter what.

My life on the line, I console him. "I'm sorry. If only I'd known how much it meant to you."

"I hinted at it. Obviously, you could never read between the lines. You still can't, you stupid twat."

A chill runs through me. What is he implying? Planning?

He cuts my thoughts short. "The bottom line... I didn't get it. I was crushed. Then another more terrible thing happened my senior year. My parents died. Their old Pinto blew up with them inside it."

"That was terrible, Logan," I say, really meaning it. My own father passed away six months earlier, but both my mom and I were able to cope. Neither of us went into a downhill spiral. If anything, we flourished, free of his self-righteous judgments and his strict rules and regulations. Logan continues, interrupting my ruminations.

"I went to live with Aunt Prissy in Bloomfield, but was able to finish out senior year at Maplewood High. I almost didn't."

I remember how disheveled he looked those final months. So gaunt and sad-eyed. I should have reached out to him, but I didn't. I couldn't. Not after the Mackenzie incident.

He pauses, his lips pressing thin. "I tried to commit suicide after I graduated. I slit my wrist."

I gasp. "My God, I didn't know that." By graduation, we'd grown distant and I went away for most of the summer to the Jersey Shore with my mom. A memory scrapes against the surface of my brain. Our trip to the ER for my broken wrist when Logan told me his heart had been broken. Was he referring to this dark episode in his life? To his suicide attempt and utter despair? I remember the profound sadness in his eyes. I'm more than sure that's what he was referring to as he perseveres.

"Aunt Prissy saved me. She took me to a shrink and got me on antidepressants. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and decided I

didn't want to go to college. I wasn't ready for it. And I was too disappointed that I didn't win the scholarship and have a chance at my dreams."

And where did it get me? All thanks to that scholarship, I got a lowly job as the assistant to a tyrant and ended up living out a nightmare, I think to myself, saying nothing.

He glances down at the shiny gun on his lap, then returns his gaze to me.

"I convalesced that summer at Aunt Prissy's house and decided to join the Peace Corps. It was a chance to get away, clear my head, and channel all my anger into something physical and meaningful."

I nod. This time to acknowledge I'm listening.

"While I was recovering at Prissy's house, I learned a lot of things. The most mind-blowing... That I was adopted. And that the woman who gave me up was her employer. The famous Maplewood author, Barbara Van Wyck, who was thrilled to get rid of me. You can only imagine my shock after all I'd been through."

I can.

"Aunt Prissy, who facilitated the closed adoption, told me that she'd begged mega-rich Barbara to help my parents with child support. To send them a monthly stipend. She also begged her to buy my parents a new car, even a second-hand one, when their piece-of-shit car began to fall apart, but the Scrooge refused. She wanted *nothing* to do with us."

Wait! Priscilla spoke? Did she fake her mutism? Lie to me that it was brought on by a traumatic event?

And there's this chilling thought: Was she complicit in Barbara's murder?

As much as I want to, this is not the time to ask these burning questions. I let Logan go on.

Anger rises in his voice. He balls his hands into fists. "That niggardly bitch! *She's* the reason my parents died! *Not* their fucked-up car. If she'd forked out the money for a new one, they wouldn't have."

His insufferable pain is contagious and I feel it in my bones. I remain silent as he rants and rages.

“Prissy also asked her to pay for my college education. The least she could do. I got into Hampshire, but neither I nor Prissy could afford the steep tuition. My parents left us nothing. Again, she refused. Another thing that led me to wanting to end my life.”

He blows out a breath, uncrosses his ankles. “Depression morphed into rage. I fantasized killing her every which way. Stabbing her. Strangling her. Drowning her. Poisoning her. Crushing her skull.”

I suppress a shudder as he picks up the gun and aims it at me. “So bestselling thriller writer, on your life, did I leave anything out?”

He curls his finger around the trigger and an obvious answer clicks in my mind. “Yes... shooting her between the eyes.”

He howls with laughter. “Good one! How could I forget? Especially since that’s how I may end your life!”

Regretting my answer, I shiver with fear as he goes on.

“After my suicide attempt, I left for Africa before I could take matters into my own hands. Had I not, I would have killed her then.”

He blows on the gun. “While I was there, I vowed I’d make her pay. But I had to wait until I got through college, which the Peace Corps paid for, and law school. Something I never wanted to attend, but I wanted the financial security and feared being a starving writer. I didn’t bother asking the two-bit bitch for money. There was no point.”

Logan pops out another beer, and I take a frugal sip of my water.

With compassion, I look him in the eye. “Logan, I so, so feel for you, but I don’t understand why you’re doing this to me. Holding me prisoner here.”

He narrows his eyes at me, still pointing the gun at me.

“I’ll tell you why... you book whore.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

He plays with the gun. Twirling it like a cowboy or some trigger-happy psycho.

"The scholarship wasn't the only thing you stole from me."

Cocking my head, I look at him, perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"You stole Barbara's manuscript. The one that was meant for me. You didn't give me the chance to steal it."

He pauses. "But that's not the reason I paid Mommy dearest a visit."

My ears perk up. My heartbeat quickens.

"Aunt Prissy told me Barbara had discovered she had cancer..."

I feel a jolt of shock as he goes on. I never knew that.

"She'd drawn up a will and was leaving all her money to some ca-ca abused women's organization."

I recall Barbara's obituary. The name of the organization. RAINN. Now, it's beginning to make sense to me. Was she sexually assaulted and Logan was the byproduct? An unwanted reminder. Is that what made her so bitter? Made her lose all her hair?

"That morning, after seeing you at The Village Coffee Shop, I decided was as good a time as any to confront her. So, during my break, I drove my pickup to her house. Though I knew the code to open the security gate, I jumped it so she wouldn't hear me, then used the set of keys Prissy gave me to unlock the front door.

"Typing away in her ratty mink coat, she didn't hear me enter her office, but as she yanked out a page from her typewriter, I sneezed

and startled her.

“She wanted to know who I was. I told her I was her son. She stared at me like I had two heads, but I’m sure she noticed the similarities between us. The red hair... green eyes... chiseled features. But she refused to believe me.”

Logan quotes her, imitating her husky smoker’s voice. ““Why should I believe you?””

Frighteningly, he sounds just like her. I can almost see The Barbarian in her black mink as he goes on.

“Telling her I had proof, I tossed the adoption papers Prissy gave me onto her desk. ‘Rubbish!’ she hissed and tossed them in the trash. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy’ and she went back to typing as if I weren’t there.”

In my head, I can picture the whole scene. It’s like I’m watching an episode of *Columbo*.

“I told her that her housekeeper, my aunt, had told me everything. How she’d willingly given me away when I was an infant to my parents—Prissy’s infertile twin sister and her childless husband.

“She asked me why I was there and what I was after. ‘Everyone in the world wants a piece of me,’ she bit out.”

Logan keeps twirling the gun. “I told her I wanted two things: first to know who my real father was.”

I interrupt him for the first time. “What did she tell you?”

“I quote: ‘None of your goddamn business. He’s dead to me. What else do you want?’

“I wasted no time telling her I wanted to be written into her will. For what she did to me—and my parents—I deserved my rightful inheritance.”

Logan’s eyes grow distant. Hollow. As if he’s reliving that moment in time.

“She glowered at me and then threw her head back, laughing hysterically. I quote again: ‘No bastard child of mine is going to get a cent from me. Not over my dead body.’

“Still laughing, she lit up one of her nasty black cancer-giving cigarettes, took a drag, and blew out a dark cloud of smoke at me. Then, ignoring me, went back to her manuscript and asked me to leave or she’d call the police.”

My eyes stay on him as he imitates her again.

“Chop! Chop!” He puts the gun down and claps his hands twice, exactly the way she used to.

Picking the gun back up, he snarls. “That did it. I lost it. Fell apart. While she typed away, I snuck up behind her and throttled her. She fought me tooth and nail, but the skinny bitch was no match for my strength. With my arm squeezed around her neck, I heard her take her last breath.”

“You k—”

“I killed her.”

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CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

I killed her. The words reverberate in my ears. I want to cover them with my hands, block the words out. I still can't wrap my head around the fact that my husband, the man I loved, is a cold-blooded murderer!

As I process this, Logan presses on. "If she wasn't going to leave me money, I'd make my own—achieve fame and fortune—by stealing her book. I was about to gather up the pages when I heard your footsteps outside her office. I knew about the secret room—my nursery—from Prissy, and quickly hid behind it. And watched you through the peephole."

For a brief second his gaze flits to the bookshelf—the thesaurus—then returns to me. His eyes darken.

"And then you fucking stole it! Can you imagine how I felt watching you steal what was rightfully mine?"

In my mind, I relive that day. Discovering Barbara dead, frantically gathering her manuscript, and stuffing it in my backpack, all the while feeling that someone was watching me.

The burning question: "Why didn't you stop me?"

"The fucking door got stuck. I couldn't get it open."

The rattling I heard.

"Finally when I got it to open, you were long gone. I hopped into my pickup and found you back in The Village. Heading into your apartment building."

I say nothing, my thudding heart in my throat.

"I waited outside. Froze my ass off. Your bitch of a landlord wouldn't let me in. She told me she'd call the cops if she saw me hanging around."

God bless Mrs. Cruikshank. I swear if I survive this ordeal, I'll do something nice for her. Pay for a trip to visit her daughter and grandchild in Miami. Continuing, Logan cuts into my mental ramblings.

"I sat in my pickup, shivering with its lousy heating, and waited for you to emerge. The headlights off so you wouldn't see my truck."

He was watching me! Waiting for me!

"Nine fricking hours later, you finally left your building. I had a hunch you had the manuscript with you because you were carrying your backpack and it seemed heavy. And why would you go out at that time of night when it was blizzarding? There wasn't a car on the road, a soul on the street."

I remember the inclement weather. The treacherous trek.

"I stealthily got out of my truck and followed you."

"I kept thinking someone was following me," I interject.

"It was frigging cold. You moved at a snail's pace."

It was slippery and I couldn't see two feet in front of me with the blinding snow, but I keep my mouth shut as he goes on.

"I watched as you tried to dump the manuscript into the dumpster. You stupid girl. You always sucked at basketball. You were a joke."

He shakes his head with disgust. I bristle. I'm tired of his insults. It's time to cut to the chase.

"Did you push me?"

Not letting go of the gun, he puts up his hands in mock surrender. "Guilty as charged."

Red-hot fury consumes me. "And you just left me there, in the blizzard, barely conscious, my wrist broken. Were you planning for me to die? Hoping I'd freeze to death? Or get buried six feet under by the snow?"

He scoffs at me. "You were the last thing on my mind as I chased after all those pages. I managed to salvage about half of them. Not enough to make *White Lies* mine, but enough to bring you down."

I connect the dots. So it was Logan who sent me all those threatening letters, some written on Barbara's typewriter, as well the

Xeroxed pages of Barbara's manuscript. And for sure slipped a copy of the prologue under the apartment door of Barbara's agent, Miranda, to escalate my downfall.

Plus, he must have been the one who stole Barbara's Cartier watch and one of her Hermès scarves, and sent them to me to unhinge me. And that creepy, red-inked infant dress, which must have been his.

It's all coming together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Only one piece is missing.

I look him dead in the eye. "You were my stalker all along?"

"Bravo!" With a salacious grin, he applauds me. "*Exactement! C'était moi.*"

Puzzle solved! It was he who sent me that menacing email from je.sais@gmail.com. Now I remember, he took French with me in high school.

My head spins as he picks up where he left off. "I had a hunch you'd scanned the manuscript into your laptop. I came to your rinky-dink apartment for dinner in hopes that I'd find it or you'd let me read it. But, no, you had it hidden and wouldn't let me see it so that I could secretly send it to myself and steal it back."

My mind flashes back to our Christmas Eve mac and cheese dinner and how he kept begging to read it. He didn't want me. He just wanted the book! How could I have been so naïve? So trusting?

Love is blind.

Tears prick the backs of my eyes as he sneers. "I would have ransacked the dump when you weren't around, but that asshole detective came looking for me, so I had to get out of town fast."

I feel so sick to my stomach I want to vomit. "Logan, why do you hate me so much?"

"You ruined my life twice. First when you stole the scholarship, second when you stole my mother's manuscript. The manuscript that belongs to *me*!"

I never stole from him per se. But there's no point in arguing. It'll only get him more agitated. He's a loose cannon with a loaded gun!

Beneath the mask, his face hardens. His nostrils flare. "You know what pisses me off the most?"

I silently shake my head, too afraid to say a word that may set him—and the gun—off.

“The skank’s story was inspired by me! A child seeking revenge on the mother who abandoned him! She had the fucking audacity to want to make money off of me! And she made me the bad guy and killed me off at the end! And you, you heartless bitch, kept the ending!”

The ending of Barbara’s manuscript always perturbed me. Morgan/Taylor should have gotten some form of justice, but I couldn’t figure out a way to do that without rewriting the entire book. There was no time. And I didn’t have the creative chops it would take.

I try to placate him. “I’m sorry, Logan. I hated the ending too. Morgan-slash-Taylor should have gotten justice. Been the hero. Not Helen, the evil mother.”

He bangs his beer can on the table. “Damn right!”

“I’m sorry I can’t rewrite it.” The tone of my voice is genuine and contrite.

“Don’t worry, you’re going to pay.” He takes another slug of his beer. “With regard to the scholarship you stole, you got your comeuppance.”

Cocking my head, I look at him, perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“Does this name ring a bell?... *Mackenzie*.”

I never want to hear her name again. She screwed Logan when she knew how much I was in love with him. In retrospect, she could have him, but it’s too late now.

Fighting back tears, I look into his eyes. “*She* deliberately hurt me, by sleeping with you,” I say, reliving how I found her in her bedroom, naked, with an equally naked Logan splayed on top of her and banging her. The two of them grunting and groaning. The horrible memory is vivid in my head.

Logan throws his head back and laughs. “Is that what you’ve always thought?”

I’m at a loss for words. He looks at me again and snorts.

“Dear Sloan, it was the other way around. It was a retribution fuck. I forced her to go down on me and then fucked her against her will, hoping you’d discover us. Your timing was impeccable.”

He chortles as I clasp my hand against my mouth. Bile rises to my chest. I'm speechless. I thought she had betrayed our friendship and she'd seduced him. In the big fight we had, ironically in front of Barbara's house, she kept telling me she hadn't. That Logan had forced himself on her. I didn't believe her. Logan was a bookwormy geek. He had no interest in Miss Popularity, who had a reputation for going after other girls' boyfriends. I was so full of rage I shoved her into one of the stone pillars flanking the wrought-iron gate. Slamming into it, she hit her head and then fell to the ground and cracked it on the sidewalk. So much blood! Was it an accident or was it deliberate? Had I intended to kill her? I ran to get help, but by then it was too late.

A horrific thought sucker punches me.

Oh my God! I'm practically a murderer myself! Maybe I deserve this fate. My second comeuppance. I can only guess what it is.

My murderous husband clutches the gun with both gloved hands and points it at me. "L-Logan, are you going to kill me?"

He grins. "Actually, no. You, my dear wife, are going to kill yourself."

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

Logan's words whirl in my brain. I'm going to kill myself? Is he expecting me to take the gun and put a bullet to my head? I can't shake my fear. He's a raging psychopath. A cold-blooded murderer. Anything's possible.

"Start typing," he barks.

"I need my laptop."

"Not for this, you don't. Use the typewriter."

"But it doesn't have a ribbon." I flash back to stealing it the day I came back here with McGrath, shortly after I'd discovered the secret nursery.

"Don't worry. I've put in a brand-new cartridge. It wasn't easy to find. And there's already a blank sheet of paper in the carriage."

I glimpse it. There's a terrifying ghostliness to it.

"By the way," he adds, "I now own this collector's item plus the coat and scarf you're wearing. Along with the furniture in this room and all the books in the secret room. My former nursery."

I look at him, perplexed.

He grins. "The Sotheby's auction, remember? I could have bid on my former crib—it went for a song— but it made no sense. We're *never* going to have a baby."

His last words totally unhinge me. *Read between the lines.* They're a confirmation that he's going to kill me or force me to kill myself. My poor baby!

"Are you ready?" he asks as Blip gives me a kick.

I do a mental reset. I need to be brave. Brave for myself. Brave for my baby. If I cooperate, maybe I can figure a way out of this mess. I've never been a great problem solver (math was my worst subject), but desperate times call for desperate measures. Maybe I can come up with a novel way to escape him. Save my life and that of my baby. I pray to God.

I stare at Barbara's red Selectric. It's just like the one Truman Capote typed on, something I discovered while watching the Hulu streaming series, *Feud*, while Logan worked late nights. Maybe this model was meant for masterpieces. Truman typed *In Cold Blood* on his and Barbara *White Lies* on hers.

I've never used Barbara's red Selectric before. It frightens me. It feels haunted. Like the keys will grow teeth and bite off my fingertips. Then jump off and gnaw me until I bleed to death. I envision myself trying to swat away the vicious, flesh-eating keys to no avail, each chomp taking a chunk out of my being. Eating me to the bone as I take my last bloody breath.

It's not possible, I tell myself. My imagination is running wild. In my head, I'm creating a Stephen King novel. A horror story.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

My heart hammering, I stare at the blank sheet of paper. "What do you want me to write?" I ask my psycho husband.

"Have you ever taken dictation?"

"Yes, many times." Barbara the Barbarian was a dictator. Not only in the tyrant sense of the word. She loved to dictate her letters to her agent and editor which I typed up on my laptop and emailed. It was some form of power.

"Good." Setting the beer can on the table where I used to work, Logan rises to his feet, the gun in his hand. Brandishing it, he paces the room. "Here's the first sentence..."

I gulp, my trembling fingers hovering over the typewriter keys as he begins.

"I can no longer live with myself knowing that I did not write *Black Lies*." Holding the gun up like an extension of his hand, my demented husband pauses. "Oh, and address the letter to your agent, editor, and fans."

I splay my fingers on the keyboard and begin to type. It's not easy. And not just because I'm quivering. It's so different from typing on a computer. The keys seem to have a mind of their own. With the slightest wrong touch, I make a typo and have to hit the erase key. It's totally stressing me out, as if I'm not stressed out enough. Surprisingly, the "S" key works. Logan must have figured out a way to fix it.

As I type away, he sneezes. Then again and again. Six times in a row.

"Hurry up!" he barks at me, his eyes watering. "I can't take all these dust motes. Or old silks."

Fifteen heart-pounding minutes later, I've composed the letter. He makes me read it back to him.

I intake a much-needed breath. Nonetheless, my voice quavers.

"To my agent, editor, and fans around the world~

I can no longer live with the fact that Black Lies is not mine. I stole it from the late Barbara Van Wyck when I was her assistant after I strangled her. Most of all, I can no longer live with my crimes. I no longer have a reason to live.

Sincerely ~ Sloan White (aka S.L. Whitman)"

The gun firmly in his hand, Logan rises and strides across the room. Stepping behind me, Logan looks over my shoulder as I finish reading it. Breathing down my neck and holding the gun to my head.

"Perfect," he breathes out, another sneeze later. "Just sign it."

He carefully pulls out the letter from the typewriter and flattens it on the desk before tossing me Barbara's fountain pen he won at auction.

I put the pen to the suicide note and sign away my life.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

Hovering in front of the desk, a smug Logan holds the signed suicide note in his left hand, the one not holding the gun.

"I'm going to scan copies of this to your agent, editor, and publisher," he says. "And send the original to the *New York Times*. I can't wait to read your obituary. I hope it's more entertaining than Barbara's."

I shudder at the thought. What photo will they use? The one that's on the inside of the book jacket? The one that led Logan to discover I'd published *White Lies* with a new title and a pen name. My demise is becoming more and more of a reality. I even feel sorry for my mom. She'll be beside herself. And what about poor Moo? Who will take care of him?

And the most unbearable thought of all. I'll never meet my baby. My poor little Blip.

A tidal wave of sadness sweeps over me. "Logan, I have to use the bathroom again." I don't really, but I'm on the verge of crying. And I don't want to let him see me shedding tears. I need to maintain a brave façade. I stand up, but he forcefully shoves me back down.

"Hold it in or pee yourself for all I care. You're not going anywhere. You've got more work to do. Don't move."

I watch as he backpedals to my former workstation, aiming the gun at me. Still facing me, he bends down and drops the letter into his laptop bag. Leaving it unzipped, he slips out another sheet of paper and returns to me.

He sets the piece of paper on Barbara's desk in front of me. "Read this and sign. But first, I want you to recite our wedding vows... the ones we added."

I search my head. I loathe and fear him so much I can't remember them. How could I have married this monster?

"I—I don't remember," I mutter under my breath.

"Well, then, let me refresh your memory." He smirks. "What's mine is yours, yours mine..."

"R-right," I stammer. *Until death do us part...*

"Yup, until death do us part." He points the gun at my head. "I've drawn up a will. Ha! Law school was good for something! Read it over, then sign and date it. I stole a notary stamp from the office and will notarize it afterward."

I gaze down and silently read it.

SLOAN WHITE-PETERSON'S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

Upon my death, I, Sloan White-Peterson, aka author S.L. Whitman, bequeath all my assets to my husband, Logan Peterson, including but not limited to my condominium and all the worldly possessions within, my savings account, my 401(k)-stock portfolio, and last but not least, my book catalogue from which he will derive all future royalties.

Before signing, I look up at him, my eyes watery. "Logan, I'll give you everything. Just let me go. *Please*. Do it for our baby."

Our baby... my last straw, hoping he will come to his senses.

He doesn't. He laughs until his eyes tear.

"That's a good one!" He cannot contain his laughter. "You *really* think I want a baby with *you*?" The laughter stops and he glowers at me. "You tricked me, woman. I was sure you were on birth control."

You never asked. But what's the point?

My heart plummeting, I'm at a loss for words. I flash back to that night when I told him I was pregnant. To his delayed reaction. I thought it was shock, but it was really fury.

"I'm sorry I ever married you, to be honest. Why do you think I worked late most nights? Yeah, I billed extra hours, but the real reason was so I didn't have to come home to you, share your bed, and have sex. It's hard to fuck a woman you hate."

His words hurt me so much it feels like my heart will implode. My bottom lip wobbles, the telltale sign since I was a child that I'm going to cry. *God, please don't let me cry!*

"I sure as hell *wasn't* looking forward to having a baby under our roof. Keeping us up at night. Changing stinky diapers. Maybe Barbara had the right idea. Like mother, like son."

He lowers his ski mask and rubs his dimpled chin with his thumb. A smug smile reappears on his face. "But now, I don't need to worry about those things because there's not going to be a baby to have to deal with."

His words are like knives to my gut. Each one coming at me faster, stabbing me deeper. A hand reflexively goes to my baby bump, and I feel a kick. A fierce one. I take it as a sign. My baby's a fighter and he or she wants me to be one too. I owe it to Blip. I'm going to figure out a way to end this nightmare. We're going to find a way out of here.

I drain the rest of my water and grow drowsy. I can't keep my eyes open.

Oh no! Has he drugged me again?

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

I wake up. Still wearing Barbara's black mink, my head wrapped in her scarf.

I'm totally disoriented. Drenched in darkness. The cold damp, musty room smells familiar. I'm lying on my back on some kind of feather bed. It's paper-thin and uncomfortable. I ache all over. From my flesh through my bones. Slowly, I sit up. Poke around. Cold metal bars meet my touch. Clamping on to one, I pull myself up and sidestep around the perimeter.

It's a cage! One meant for a wild animal. And I'm trapped inside!

My mouth is parched. My throat's dry. My armpits stink. I have a headache the size of Texas.

And my chest hurts. Breathing in this mildewy air can't be good for my baby or me. I hope there isn't any black mold lingering beneath the walls. That would be really bad.

Taking a deep breath that pains my lungs, I squeeze my eyes shut, rub my temples, desperately trying to remember where I am. How I got here.

It all comes to me.

I'm in Barbara Van Wyck's secret nursery. The one behind her office.

Now, locked in a cage with my baby inside me.

A knock-knock.

The secret door creaks open. The wall sconces flicker on. Adjusting to the light, I blink several times.

“Good morning, madam. I’ve brought you breakfast in bed.” The put-on voice sounds posh and British.

Logan. Grinning. He must have drugged me again. Stupid me drank two bottles of water. Who knows what he secretly laced them with this time. For all I know, I could have drunk antifreeze.

I study him. He’s clad in the same all-black clothes as yesterday, including the balaclava-like mask and leather gloves. In his hands is a tray with a piece of bread on a paper plate, and a juice box.

“How did you sleep, my lovely?”

“How does it look?” I growl. I don’t need a mirror to tell me I’m totally disheveled and must look like hell.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get used to your new sleeping quarters.” His cocky grin widens. “Welcome to your writer’s retreat!”

“It’s a freaking cage!” Measuring about ten by ten. About a hundred square feet. It sits exactly where Logan’s canopied crib once stood.

A chilling thought rips through me, and I shiver.

This is where he was born. And where I’m going to die.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins. I vehemently shake the metal bars of the door. “Let me out of here!” I scream.

My desperate plea falls on deaf ears. His eyes glint with pride. “I built this myself. On the weekends while you were *trying* to write.”

He lied to me! He told me he had to go into his office to work. I can feel my blood bubbling with rage. I shake the door again, rattling the cage.

He gives me a smug smile. “I hope you will be inspired here. A change of scenery is always good for creativity.”

“I need to pee!” I yell at him. “Let me out of here!” The door to the cage is locked with a thick metal padlock.

I also need to brush my teeth and wash my face. A shower would be nice too, but that would surely be too much to ask of this monster.

“First things first... Please take your breakfast from the tray.”

Freeing myself is futile. I stop rattling the door and stare at the bread and juice box. I think it’s cranberry.

Then I glare at him. “How do I know they aren’t poisoned? Laced with arsenic?” Barbara always used arsenic to poison her characters. Like Rohypnol, it’s tasteless, colorless, and odorless.

"Trust me, they aren't."

"You seriously want me to trust you?" He's the one who should be behind bars with the key thrown away.

"Yeah, babe. Why would I poison you when you have to write a book?" He shows me the sealed juice box. "There's no way this has been tampered with."

I examine it. It looks okay. Just the way we bought it at Trader Joe's.

"And I'll even take a bite of the bread." He chomps, chews, and swallows. Then grins.

"See?"

"Fine." I stab the word at him, and slide the slice of bread and the juice box through the bars of the cage. I rip off a big chunk of the bread and stuff it into my mouth, then wash it down with the juice through the attached straw. I'm hungrier and thirstier than I thought. I can't wait to see what's for lunch.

"Now, can I go to the bathroom and pee?"

Wordlessly, he unlocks the padlock with a small metal key that he retrieves from his jeans pocket. I make a mental note to remember where he keeps it. Maybe there's a way I can confiscate it. The lock unclicks and he swings the door open.

I take two steps.

"Hold it right there," he orders. He slips the key back into his pocket and from a back pocket he retrieves his gun. He aims it at me. Amazingly, it doesn't frighten me. Have I grown numb to fear?

He jerks his head. "C'mon, move it. And once again, don't try anything funny."

My gut tells me he won't shoot me. At least not yet. The psycho needs me alive to write a book for whatever reason. Holding the gun, he follows me to the guest bathroom and lets me take care of myself in private.

To my pleasant surprise, there's a brand-new toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and some facial soap along with some guest towels. I take a pee, brush my teeth, and wash up. Then glimpse myself in the gold-leaf mirror above the sink. Fixing my messy ponytail, I look better than I thought.

"Hurry up!" I hear him call out.

"I'll be right out," I reply.

He follows me back to the nursery and orders me back inside the cage. He locks the door with the padlock.

"Ready to get some words in?"

I don't respond.

"I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

I mentally roll my eyes. As if I could escape this jail cage...

Then again, maybe I can...

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

My psycho husband returns a few minutes later carrying a laptop in his hands. I'm not sure if the computer is his or mine. As he gets closer, I see it's mine. There's a computer repair store sticker on top of the case. I had to get it serviced when one of the speakers blew. The repair dude told me I should consider buying a new laptop because this one was old and was going to start shutting down. To expect one thing after another. I hope today's not the day that's going to happen.

I take it from him as he slides it through the bars of the cage.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Open it and start writing."

I look around the cage waiting for a desk and chair to magically appear. They don't.

"Um, where am I supposed to sit?"

"On the floor. Use the feather bed to support your back. It's very versatile."

I arrange the feather bed so it's folded against the metal bars.

"And where am I supposed to put my computer?"

"On your lap, you idiot. That's why it's called a laptop." With an eye roll, he huffs. "Now get into position."

Obligingly, I sit down cross-legged on the floor, leaning against the feather bed. I set the computer on my lap. It's not going to be easy typing with my baby bump in the way.

"Now, open it up and click on a blank Word document."

My computer is fully charged. It whirs to life. Again, I do as he's asked. I stare at the blank page before me. It's what I always do. Day in, day out. It's become a way of life.

I look up at him. "What do you want me to write?"

"For starters, *A NOVEL* by Logan G. Peterson."

I screw up my face. "You don't have a middle name."

"I do now. 'G' for Genius."

He's so full of himself I could 'G' for gag. "So, you're expecting me to write a full-length novel and you're going to take credit for it?"

"That's the plan, Stan."

"In case you've forgotten, my name is Sloan. Answer me."

He scowls at me. "You of *all* people shouldn't question my ethics... Plagiarist!"

He throws the ugly word at me. It hurts.

"Do you know where the word comes from?" I ask, recovering from the sting. Procrastinating.

"Do you think I really care?"

"No, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Interestingly—or better yet, ironically—it comes from the Latin word *plagiarius* which means 'kidnapper.' The meaning evolved to label a person who stole the words rather than the children or slaves of others when the first century Roman poet Martial claimed another poet had 'kidnapped his verses.'"

He listens with interest, then sneers. "Enough. Shut up and start writing."

"What kind of story do you want to tell?"

"A bestseller, what else?"

"Any preferred genre?"

"A thriller. And it better be a jaw-dropping one."

"That's a novel idea," I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Save your stupid puns for the book."

"How long does it have to be?"

"Three hundred pages... seventy-five thousand words."

Yikes! "How long do I have to write it?"

"One month... Thirty days."

Yikes again! That means ten pages—or 2,500 words—a day.

"And what if I can't finish it in time?"

Again, he sneers. "Don't go there."

I gulp. I feel a noose around my neck.

He paces back and forth. "Here's the deal. Every day you will produce at least ten typewritten pages, double spaced. I will keep you nourished and hydrated and allow you to have bathroom breaks and get a good night's sleep. If you fail to deliver the pages, one of these privileges will be taken away from you."

I contemplate all the ways I can die. Starvation. Dehydration. Sepsis. Renal failure. I already feel as good as dead, but then my baby kicks. I swear this kid's going to be a linebacker. I've got to be like him. If I'm to survive, I need to play ball. Kick the words out of the park. Score a touchdown.

I've never been good at sports and might be mixing my metaphors, but I've got to do my best to get out of here alive.

Before I can strategically plan a move, Logan cuts into my mental ramblings. "The good news is..."

There's good news?

"... you won't have any distractions. There's no Wi-Fi so you won't be able to dilly-dally on social media or play your silly word games. And you won't have your phone so you can't chitchat with anyone, check your email and texts, or go online."

He pauses and wags a finger. "One last thing... I want you to keep the coat and scarf on at all times. I have a theory it'll inspire you."

He pivots toward the secret door.

"I'll be back with your lunch at noon."

It all painfully sinks in. I'm totally cut off from the outside world. And no one knows I'm here.

An icy chill runs through me. I hug the fur to my body.

I'm on death row.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

I stare at the blank Word doc on my computer screen. I'm good at this. I've been doing this job all year. Waiting for words to magically appear.

I so want to play Wordle. Check my fan mail. Read my latest reviews. Even go shopping on eBay.

Nope, I can't.

Think, Sloan, think. It's the only thing I can do other than stare. That and bite my nails.

My mind flashes back to the first time I knew I wanted to be a writer. I was reading a Nancy Drew book, *The Hidden Staircase*. I loved it so much. Every character. Every word. I remember finishing it and thinking I, too, wanted to write Nancy Drew books one day. Or something like them. Books readers couldn't put down.

I later learned from my eighth-grade English teacher that the woman behind the pen name, Carolyn Keene, had lived in Maplewood. Her real name was Harriet Stratemeyer Adams. The Wellesley-educated socialite's Maplewood home, not far from Barbara's, served as the model for Nancy's home in fictional River Heights. She died a decade before I was born, a few months shy of ninety, shortly after establishing the Stratemeyer Scholarship in honor of her father.

Online, I read an archived interview. She talked about how she got her inspiration and offered advice to aspiring authors.

Write from your life experiences. Write about what you know. Your truth is your best narrative. Bring your backstory forward. The best stories are right in front of you.

Outside, I hear an ear-splitting boom. It dawns on me that today's the Fourth of July. Ironically, Independence Day, given that I'm a prisoner. An indentured slave to my psycho husband.

Then another boom. I glance down at my watch. It's not even ten a.m. Isn't it too early for fireworks?

Then another boom—one so thunderous it rattles the cage. The lights flicker like in a horror movie and the next thing I know, it's raining. Make that pouring. The heavy drops hammer the gabled roof. Another raucous clap of thunder and I'm more than convinced we're having a thunderstorm. Fingers crossed that the decrepit house has no leaks and I won't be typing away in a river. Or drowning.

Pitter-patter. Pitter-patter.

The ruthless rain pounds in my ears as I stare at my computer screen. Despite the extenuating circumstance, my hands are surprisingly steady as my fingers hover over the keyboard. *The best stories are right in front of you.* I feel an itch in my fingertips, and they touch down on the black keys. *Click. Click. Click. Click.* The words begin to flow. They're flying onto the screen.

PROLOGUE

I stare at the blank page on my computer screen.

Why won't the words come?

Because this is hardly a place to write a grocery list.

Let alone a novel.

I'm trapped in a cage.

Locked up behind bars like a tiger at a zoo.

Or some serial killer in solitary confinement.

Prison would be heaven compared to this living hell.

A cold draft seeps through the cracks in the walls.

It's pouring outside. Rain pounds the roof.

Shivering, I hug myself to ward off the ice in my blood.

The fear in my soul.

*A voice, rapt with rage, shoots through the room.
“Seventy-five thousand words. Do you hear me? Do it or die.”
My captor acts like I have no choice.
The truth is, I don’t.
I’ve already signed my life away.
You have to believe me. The end awaits me.
Someone, please save me.
For once, I’m not telling a lie.*

I don’t stop to read my words or to correct any typos. The rain keeps beating in my ears. I keep going. *Click. Click. Click. Click.*

By the time Logan comes back with lunch—a pita sandwich and a protein shake—I’ve written another five pages. The first chapter of my book. Yes, *my* book.

By the time he comes back with dinner, a Greek salad and a Hansen’s soda, I’ve written another chapter. Ten pages in total. Twenty-five hundred words.

I even have a title. Book 2 in the *Lies* series.

If I ever get out of here, I’m going to get it published.

RED LIES
By S.L. Whitman

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

Over the next few days, I get into a routine.

Despite the ongoing rain, I get the best night's sleep I've had in months. My nightmares have gone away. I dream of happy things. Playing on the beach with my baby. Going to book signings with my little one tucked in a carrier. Licking an ice cream cone as I push a stroller. Soaking in a hot bubble bath with a glass of wine.

I think the universe is sending me a message. A message of hope. A message to persevere.

Rested, I wake up early. Logan brings me breakfast and lets me do my morning business. The gun never far away.

Then, I get to work. Typing away, only stopping to eat or drink something. And to stretch. I should mention I've developed a cough from the toxic air so when Logan is not around, I tie Barbara's scarf around my face covering my mouth and nostrils. I can't be too safe when it comes to my baby.

My creative juices are flowing. I have found my voice. I am the breathing heart and soul of my characters, the force that drives my narrative forward. Not the ghost of a dead legend in a smelly fur coat. Though I'll admit I can still feel Barbara's presence in this house and sometimes wonder if it's her nudging me on. Like I'm channeling her.

My pity party has turned into a word fest. Each word I write fills me with giddy excitement. I'm no longer daunted by the enormity of my task. To write a seventy-five-thousand-word book in thirty days. I

have to complete it if I have any chance of being a free woman again, and bringing my baby into this world. The truth is, you have no choice but to be productive when you have a gun to your head. And I mean that literally.

I've asked Logan point-blank (no pun intended) if he'll let me go if I succeed. All he says is that we'll discuss my options when I'm done. It's not the answer I want to hear. I promise him that I'll not breathe a word about my abduction to a soul.

His response is always the same two staccato words: "Shut. Up!"

I think the rain is fueling my drive. That and baby Blip, whose kicks spur me on. My wrist aching, my fingers cramping, I write and write and write. Usually getting in over four thousand words. I've had to resort to using my wrist brace, grateful that Logan told me to bring it along.

My lunatic husband, who reads my pages every night while he charges my laptop (it's astonishing the house still has water and power, and I have no idea who pays those steep bills), is very pleased with my story. He, however, strongly wants the bad guy to win.

Not in my book, buster.

On day five of writing, now almost twenty-thousand words in and imprisoned here for almost a week, I'm at the part where the trapped heroine, Snow (doesn't her name feel fresh, pure, and magically evocative?), starts thinking of a way to escape her demented captor Rogan (sounds familiar? It means redheaded in Irish). For the first time, the words don't flow. I'm at a stumbling block and need a notebook to jot down some ideas. To choreograph the escape plan. And then—bingo!—out of the blue it comes to me.

When Logan comes to bring me lunch, this time a stale ham and cheese sandwich, I tell him that I desperately need some supplies. A college ruled spiral notebook, a pack of large paper clips, number two mechanical pencils, and some Post-its.

"Why do you need all of this stuff?" he asks suspiciously.

I tell him that I have a gazillion ideas flying around my head and I need to write them down. That one of the things I like to do is mark pages with paper clips and Post-its.

Satisfied, he agrees to go into town to pick them up.

Tonight I'm going to escape!

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

Logan returns at five p.m. He's been gone all afternoon. He must have run some errands.

"Did you have a lot to do?" I ask.

"Yeah, given that you and I are likely going to be here for another three-to-four weeks, I stocked up on stuff like shaving cream, shampoo, conditioner... you know, things like that."

"Did you by chance buy me any deodorant?" Boy, do I stink. My poor little baby is probably holding their nose, instead of sucking their thumb.

He sniffs, then makes a disgusted face. "Whoof! I didn't think about that. I'll do that when I go back into town tomorrow. I had to leave my pickup with The Village Mechanic."

My brows lift. "What's wrong with it?"

"Old Bessie broke down. She needs new spark plugs. Thankfully, the owner-dude gave me a lift back here so I didn't have to walk home in the pouring rain with all the heavy bags."

"Oh." I hope he can't detect the disappointment in my voice. Escaping this hellhole in Logan's truck was part of my plan.

On the other hand, the incessant pouring rain, which I'd hope would have stopped by now, *wasn't* part of my plan. Now, I have to escape by foot and I'll probably slip and kill myself on the slippery pavement. Or get hit by lightning. My heart sinks then rebounds. Maybe I can hitch a ride to safety.

But you know what can happen to hitchhikers...

"I brought you your supplies," he says, cutting into my desolate thoughts. Rather than opening the cage's locked door, he slips them in between the bars one by one. The notebook, the pencils, the Post-its, and last but not least the paper clips. I'm relieved to see he got me the big metal ones I asked for.

A sheepish smile slides across his face. "For being such a good girl, I also bought you a surprise."

My eyes widen as he reaches back inside the brown paper bag.

Still wearing gloves, he plucks out a small red box with yellow handles. I recognize it instantly. It's a McDonald's Happy Meal. I loved them when I was a kid.

"I got you a small cheeseburger and some fries. Plus a chocolate shake."

"Oh, Logan!" I gush as if he's my hero. "That's so sweet of you! I'm famished."

The truth is, I am. I could practically eat the cardboard box. The greasy fast-food smells delicious.

He squishes the box between the bars. It narrowly makes it through. Then, slides in the chocolate shake.

"*Bon appétit*," he says as I take them from him.

After he departs, I tear the box open and take a whopping bite of my burger. I swear it's the best thing I've ever eaten. Then I shove a French fry into my mouth, then another and another. McDonald's fries are my favorite. They're addictive. In no time, I wolf down the entire meal. Including the grease-stained paper wrapped around the burger. It's chewy and juicy and oh-so good.

Baby Blip seems to think so too and gives me a hard kick. There's a reason they're called Happy Meals. I'm so happy I could cry.

After consuming everything, I open the plastic bag with the little toy that comes with the kids' meal.

It's a blue unicorn. Likely a tie-in to the latest Disney movie. Unicorns are a symbol of good luck. Another sign from the universe that I'm going to get out of here. Blip and I are going to be okay.

Now, back to work.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

At exactly eight p.m., Logan returns to collect my computer.

"I see you devoured your Happy Meal," he says, taking my laptop from me through the metal bars as well as the now empty McDonald's carton.

"Yeah, it was delicious. I couldn't get enough of it." I don't tell him I ate the paper wrapping and almost ate the cardboard box. And feel deliriously happy. "I saved the shake for later."

He eyes the tall plastic cup on the floor. It's next to all my supplies. "Don't let it go to waste. You may never drink another one."

"I won't." Not letting myself be unnerved by his ominous words, I bend down to retrieve it and take a sip through the straw.

"Logan," I say as he's about to pivot on his heel. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Spit it out."

"Could you please keep the lights on tonight?" Usually after dinner, he comes back, collects my laptop to review my pages, and turns all the lights off.

Skeptically, he narrows his eyes at me. "Why?"

"I need to write stuff down in my notebook. *Plot*. And I won't be able to see without light."

He crinkles his nose. "Okay, fine. But don't pull an all-nighter. It'll mess with your writing mojo. You're already up to Chapter Nineteen... Amazing work. I love it so far. I can't wait to see where you're taking this."

I'm taking it with *me*, assrot. When I kill you tonight and flee.

After he exits through the secret door and closes it behind him, baby Blip gives me a kick.

Touché.

Now it's a waiting game. Logan usually reads my pages, then watches stupid TikTok videos on his phone for a few hours. I can always hear him snorting with laughter through the walls. Maybe he drinks a couple of beers. When the laughter dies down and his phone is turned off, and the light from Barbara's office no longer slithers under the secret door, it means he's sloshed and has called it a night. From having shared a bed with him for over six months, I know he falls asleep quickly. Not like me who often twists and turns and can't stop thinking.

To pass the time away, I write up ideas for chapters and scenes in my notebook along with some punchy dialogue. I keep checking my watch. By 9:30, there is no longer a light shining under the door. And it's quiet on the other side. It's a bit early for him to have conked out. Maybe he drank too much beer. Plus, the last few days have probably been exhausting for him. Planning the perfect murder.

With any luck, it won't be mine.

I rip out the pages I've scribbled notes on from the spiral notebook and fold them under the waistband of my sweats. I rub my big, rounded belly and feel Blip kick.

"C'mon, my baby. We're getting out of here."

Wasting no time, I open the box of paper clips and pluck two out. In my head, I replay the step-by-step video I watched on YouTube doing research for Barbara. The geeky demonstrator's name was Howie the How To Guy, and the video was aptly called "How to Pick a Padlock with a Paper Clip." I was shocked to see it had over twenty-three million views. I mean, are there really that many people in the world who have the burning desire to learn how to do this? And why?

It's surprisingly not very hard and takes no time. The most complicated part is making the two-part paper clip tool. Sitting on the cold floor of the cage, I unfold one of the metal clips into a straight line and then fold it in half. I then twist the top half so it forms something that looks like the eye of a sewing needle. This is my

tension wrench. I bend the other paper clip so that one edge is at a right angle. This is the actual picker.

With both clips in the palm of my hand, I scoot over to the locked door. Kneeling, I insert the tension wrench into the keyhole of the lock and then begin raking away at the inside barrels. I think it's more like sawing, as I frantically move the sharp, unfolded L-shaped clip back and forth, side to side. I pray to the lock gods; they've heard my prayers before when I lived in my decrepit Maplewood apartment. *C'mon, c'mon*. Five minutes later... CLICK. The lock snaps opens! Thank you, lock gods! Thank you, blue unicorn! I remove the lock from the door and rise to my feet. My heart racing, I let myself out of the cage.

I'm free! Well, almost. Now all I have to do is get out the front door with my laptop before Logan stops me.

Or shoots me.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

With the lock, bent paper clips, and one of the lead pencils tucked inside the deep pockets of Barbara's mink along with my lucky blue unicorn, I slowly turn the knob of the nursery door and open it, hoping it won't make a noise and wake Logan up.

With the heavy velvet curtains drawn, Barbara's office is pitch black except for a lit candle that gives it a little light. Despite the downpour, I can hear Logan snoring. Tiptoeing, I make my way to the corner chair he's sound asleep in, hoping I won't trip over any unforeseen obstacle.

It takes me a few breathless minutes. My heart is pounding. And cold droplets of water are bombarding me. There must be leaks in the roof causing the rain to come through the high-beamed ceiling. How long has this been going on? Fingers crossed the ceiling is still stable. Just what I *don't* need—a massive chunk of plaster falling upon me. Thank God, I've got my lucky unicorn.

Work your magic, Blue!

The flickering candle illuminates the outline of Logan's body. He's slumped in the chair, his head resting against the back of it, his arms folded across his chest, and his long legs outstretched. My laptop is on the table, a bottle of beer and the candle next to it. I shiver as I wonder, where is the gun?

All I have to do is grab my laptop and make it to the front door before he wakes up. Inhaling a steeling breath, I tell myself I can do it. For the sake of my life and my baby's.

Easier said than done. A snag. Before I can confiscate my laptop, I have to disconnect the charger. The little green light is on. I jiggle the tip of the power cord that's plugged into it. Damn it. I can't get it out. And it's making noise. Shit. It's going to wake up Logan. He stirs. Finally, I give it a firm yank and it disconnects from the port. Just from this little glitch, I'm already frazzled, not thinking straight. My heart is galloping and there's a tremor in my hands.

I'm shaking so much that when I lift the laptop off the table, I almost drop it. In my frantic effort to save it, I knock over the beer bottle. It rolls off the table and shatters on the floor.

"Huh?" I hear Logan mumble.

Oh no! I've awoken him. *Run, Sloan, run!* But I can't get my feet to move. I'm paralyzed with fear.

Logan's eyes pop open and he comes to his senses. He sees me in the candlelight. Our eyes connect.

"What are *you* doing here?" he yells. "How the hell did you get out?"

This is hardly the time to have a heart-to-heart conversation. Without overthinking it, I bonk him over the head with my laptop with all the strength I can muster.

"OW!" he yelps as the bone-crushing bang reverberates in my ears.

His skull must be made of lead because I haven't knocked him out. I haven't even dazed him. If anything, I've made a dent in my computer case. Rubbing the top of his head, he's ablaze with red-hot rage.

"You little bitch, you're going to pay for that!"

He grabs the laptop out of my hands, then shoves me to the floor and mounts me.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

Splayed on top of me, Logan grips my shoulders and pins me to the hardwood floor, my body wedged between his powerful thighs.

I writhe, kick, and scream but can't free myself from under the weight of him.

"Logan, let me go!"

He slaps me hard across the face and I jerk my head to the side from the sting. "Shut up," he hisses, venom pouring from his diabolic eyes. Then he slaps me again.

"Please stop!" I beg again, hot tears in my eyes, my voice strangled and desperate.

My words fall on deaf ears. He bursts into maniacal laughter. His eyes, electric, glow neon green. His expression is primal and feral. I don't even recognize him.

"You're hurting me!" I cry out.

"Believe me, you don't know what pain is. How much I can inflict."

What is he going to do to me?

With one hand, my sicko husband digs into his back pocket. I watch in horror as he slides out a metal object. The gun. It glints in his hand.

Then, I remember...

I have a weapon too. Struggling beneath him, I dig into a pocket of Barbara's mink coat and fumble for the bent paper clip. The raker.

I find it and on my next harsh breath, I rake his face with it. Digging the needle-sharp tip deep into his flesh. Over and over. Each

rip of his skin, each speck of blood driving me to do it again and again. Deeper and deeper. Faster and faster. I'm a warrior just like my baby.

Caught off guard, he screams in agony. So close to me, I can see the deep, bloody streaks. The patchwork of gashes I've created. He'll be scarred for life if he survives this night. I'm not going to let that happen.

Unable to take it anymore, he rolls off me, and I'm able to snatch the gun out of his hand while he writhes in pain and whimpers. His face is a frightening, contorted, bloody mess.

With the weapon in my hand, not knowing if it's loaded or if I can shoot it, I manage to stand and stagger back to my laptop. I can't leave without it. My new book is on it. There's no way I'll be able to recreate the hundred or so pages I've written after this night's trauma.

I want to save my career, but what about my baby?

I second-guess myself.

Leave the laptop behind and run? Save my life and my baby's?

There's no time to reason. Something clutches my neck, coiling around it like a python.

Immobilizing me. Choking me.

"You crazy bitch!" It's Logan!

"I'm going to kill you just the way I killed *her*!"

He strangled Barbara and now he's strangling me. Writhing, I try to fight him off, but I can't. I'm no match for his strength. I can't free myself from his choke hold. My strength zapped, I let go of the gun, and hear it clatter on the floor.

He squeezes harder and harder. Wheezing sounds spill out of my lips. He's crushing my windpipe. I can't breathe.

But I can still think. All the air is escaping my lungs, but my brain hasn't shut down.

My head bowed, I glance down. His feet are bare and one of them, his right one, is in between mine. Gasping for air, I reach back into the coat pocket and curl my fingers around the metal padlock. In one single swift move, I yank it out and fling it onto his foot. I hear the metal make contact with his flesh. I may have broken a bone. Thank you, lock gods!

“OW!” he screams at the top of his lungs.

And then I reach for my third weapon. The lead pencil. Wasting no time, I extract it from Barbara’s coat pocket and, gripping it so tightly my knuckles hurt, stab the sharp point into his thigh. I think I’ve gone a good inch deep. Maybe more. For sure, the bright yellow shaft is embedded in his skin. To paraphrase the famous saying, “The pencil is mightier than the sword.”

Letting go of me, he screams again and curses under his breath. Calling me some nasty name I deserve. And am proud of.

I catch my breath. My mind races. As he hops around, I have a tiny window of opportunity. The laptop or the gun? Or should I just leave both behind and dash to the front door before he recovers?

I go for the gun.

Lunging, I reach for it when I feel a forceful kick from behind.

It sends me reeling to the floor. I bang my head and a sharp pain radiates up my ankle. Like a phoenix, I manage to rise.

I see stars. I can barely put pressure on my right foot. I stumble.

Then with a grunt, he kicks me hard again. I fall against the table.

The table tips and the candle goes over.

Oh my God. I’m on fire!

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

To my horror, Barbara's black mink has caught fire. Hot red-orange flames rise from the pelts of fur like a wildfire. The stench is horrific. Something between a sewer and a dead animal. In a panic, I roll side to side on my back, trying to smother the flames that are crawling up the sleeves. Making their way to my hair. It's hard to do with my baby bump and before I can quell them, the fire spreads. Not just on the fur but along the wood floor.

I hear Logan cackle. "Burn, baby, burn."

His words terrify me. I'm going to burn to death with my precious baby. Fear heats every fiber of my being.

"Logan," I plead as I roll around. "Do something. Help me!"

He laughs again. "I can't make my mind up. Whether to watch you burn to a crisp or put you out of your misery." He eyes the gun. The flames illuminate the glint in his eye. It's one of pure evil. "Maybe I can do both."

Adrenaline pumping through my heated blood, I manage on my next desperate roll to miraculously quell the flames and grab the gun. The metal feels like molten lava.

"No way!" Logan bellows.

Before I can aim it at him or take my next breath, he kicks the gun out of my hand with his barefoot. The gun doesn't go far, but it's out of my reach. And I can barely see it. An orange-gray cloud of smoke fills the room as the flames grow taller and taller, climbing up

the walls and rising to the beamed ceiling. Everything burns. My eyes. My lungs. My throat.

Rain is still coming through the ceiling, but it's hardly enough to quench the soaring flames all around me. Before long, all of me will be burning.

Then a sudden crash is followed by another. I startle. Two plaster boulders have landed on either side of me, narrowly missing Logan. I glance upward. Oh my God. The beamed ceiling is caving in! I'm doomed!

The Satanic glint in Logan's eyes has been replaced by one of sheer terror. "I'm getting out of here!" The wicked glint returns for a split second. Along with a wicked grin. "Burn in hell, baby! Sorry you're not going to have a chance to read *my* book!"

He's going to leave me here alone to die. I watch with a mixture of wide-eyed horror and helpless despair as he pivots on his bare feet to snatch my laptop—*my* book!—off the table.

About to snag it, he yelps. Cursing under his breath, he hops around on one foot like a one-legged pirate.

Blood mixes with rainwater on the floor.

I think he's stepped on a shard of glass from the broken beer bottle.

I thank my lucky unicorn. I have another small window of opportunity to get out of here.

That is, if I can walk.

I push myself to standing and wincing, I practically crumple back onto the fiery floor. I can barely put any pressure on my right foot. The pain is excruciating. I may have broken it.

Then, I start to wheeze. The toxic flames are still burning my lungs and my throat. I yank off Barbara's Hermès silk scarf and wrap it around my face, covering my mouth and nostrils. It helps a little.

The smoke is so thick I can't see Logan. Or hear him. My hunch is he made it out of the blazing house. Alive. Now it's my turn... that is, if I don't pass out from smoke inhalation.

And I've made up my mind. I'm escaping with my book. There's no way I'm leaving it behind. I'm not going to let *my* words, *my* story die.

Pushing through the agonizing pain, I manage to grab my laptop. Holding it protectively under my arm, I hobble toward Barbara's office door, one slow, excruciating step at a time. Skirting the flames that keep sprouting around me. My heart pounding, my lungs burning, I feel like I'm in a maze, running a marathon, though I've never run one before, and I'm moving like a sloth.

"Hang in there, Blip," I audibly tell my baby, my voice a hoarse whisper. "We're gonna make it!" I'm halfway to the door when the unthinkable happens. My ankle gives and I go flying onto the floor, flat on my tummy. The melting laptop beneath me. With my hands I push myself up into a downward dog position, when I hear something that resembles a large branch snapping off a tree. I look up and gasp. One of the fiery timber beams that spans the crumbling ceiling has fallen off and is coming right at me. The embers flying. *Crash!* It lands on my back. Oh, the pain! I sob as scorching hot tears fall from my eyes and singe my cheeks.

Weighing a ton, it pins me down. I writhe but am too weak to free myself. But I refuse to accept my fate that my baby and I are going to burn to death here in Barbara's mansion. Along with my manuscript.

I'm not giving up.

Then, a voice I never want to hear again seeps into my ears.

"You know what! I'm going to end your sorry life..."

Logan.

"And take back what's mine!"

"Please, Logan," I plead, my voice thick with smoke and tears. "Take my laptop. You can have the book. Just help me to safety... Please!"

A wicked laugh and then two sharp, little words. "Shut. Up."

And in my head, two mute, little words. *The. End.*

My life is over. But it's not fear that consumes me. It's sadness. Catastrophic sorrow that morphs into grief. I've let my baby down. I've robbed brave, little Blip of their life. Forgive me, God, for being so selfish. Please forgive me, my precious baby.

My hand still curled around the unicorn, I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to stop the scalding hot tears from leaking. A floor-to-ceiling holographic image appears before me. *Barbara*. In her long black

mink coat and an Hermès silk kerchief. She smirks at me. *It's time to pay for what you did.*

This house is still hers. It remembers. Is this its form of revenge? I stole Barbara's book baby. And now the house will steal both my book and the baby growing inside me.

"It's time to put you out of your misery." Logan's voice is the voice of the house. The house he was born in. The house that was stolen from him. "See ya in hell!"

A click of the trigger. Biting down on my bottom lip, the metallic tang of blood mixing with the salty taste of tears on my tongue, I'm about to take my last breath when sirens whir in my ears, and the door to Barbara's office comes crashing down.

"Put the gun down, Peterson!"

Another familiar voice. A loud, angry, gruff one.

A shot is fired. Then another.

I'm losing consciousness.

From all the smoke.

All the pain.

I honestly don't know if I'm dead or alive.

Until a horde of heavy footsteps thunders in my ears. Then, the familiar voice again. The tone urgent.

"Gonzales, Winthorpe, help me get the beam off her."

Several grunts and groans and I'm freed.

"Hang in there," says the gruff voice, now softer. "We're going to get you out of here."

Two strong arms lift me up and carry me toward the door.

Then everything fades to black.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

A siren blares in my ears. Every bone, joint, and muscle hurts. I feel so sore, inside and out.

I breathe. My lungs burn.

I swallow. My throat feels like it's on fire.

I peel my eyes open. They feel like burning embers.

I'm disoriented, in terrible pain, but slowly everything comes into focus.

Detective McGrath is by my side, seated in a jump chair. Some guy I don't recognize is sitting close by him, wearing black pants, a blue parker, and a baseball cap with the letters EMT scrolled in yellow on the visor.

The siren continues to blast. I'm strapped to a gurney. A breathing tube stuck up my nose. An IV plugged into my left wrist. A warm, heavy blanket covering me.

Whatever vehicle I'm in is moving at lightning speed. Zigzagging through traffic.

Then, it comes to me.

I'm in an ambulance.

McGrath meets my eyes. He looks weary. His eyes heavy-lidded and bloodshot. His ruddy complexion sooty and ashen.

"Detective..." My voice trails off. My throat is so raw I can barely say one word. Okay, make that three syllables.

I can barely hear myself.

"Sloan," he says, "we're almost at Saint Barnabas Hospital. You're going to be okay." His voice sounds fatherly. Compassionate and caring. Nothing like the hard-boiled detective who suspected me of Barbara Van Wyck's murder and questioned me.

The events of tonight spin around in my head, making me dizzy.

"How did you find me? Know I was at Barbara's house?"

I listen quietly as he explains. Logan was always a suspect. Especially after he skipped town and fled to California right after Barbara's murder. Though the fingerprint sweep that was done when he and Ramirez went back to her mansion showed nothing, a new state-of-the-art test found Logan's DNA all over his baby clothes, toys, and bottles. It matched Barbara's.

They had enough evidence to bring him in for questioning, but then he left his law firm and disappeared from Manhattan.

"How did you know where he was going?" I manage.

"We got a tip from his worried aunt..."

"Priscilla?"

McGrath nods. "Yeah, that's her name."

I smile to myself. Priscilla is a good person.

"She told us her nephew was unstable and threatening to end your life in some undisclosed location."

Pre-meditated murder. I shiver as McGrath goes on.

"We got his license plate and vehicle description from the DMV and then we had a stroke of luck."

Eager to hear more, I don't interrupt.

"He was caught speeding by a CCTV camera on the I-78 near the Maplewood exit. Some people in town told us they'd seen the blue truck. We found it in the local mechanic's garage. We showed him a photo of Logan, and the mechanic confirmed your husband had left his vehicle with him and asked for a lift to Barbara Van Wyck's former residence."

He stops to take a breath. "When we got there, the house was already ablaze. We called the fire department for backup, but we couldn't wait and went in."

He and his team couldn't have gotten there a second later. I was about to die. An ironic thought crosses my mind. Detective McGrath,

my former nemesis, is now my hero. He valiantly risked his life to save mine.

"Thank you, Detective," I whisper. That's all I can say.

A faint smile plays on his lips. "Hey, it's all part of the job."

A thank-you is not enough. I'm eternally grateful to him. An idea comes to me. I'm going to dedicate my new book to him.

My new book. A wave of sadness sweeps over me. A mixture of hopelessness and despair.

"Detective, were you able to save my laptop?" My voice quavers. It probably melted in the fire.

He smiles again, more brightly. "You're a lucky girl, Sloan White. My team did. They're bringing it back to the station and we'll give it back to you when you're ready."

My voice grows a tad stronger. "Was there any damage to it?"

"Well, except for the power cord being destroyed in the blaze, not that we could see." He pauses. "But you should treat yourself to a new one. Even my wife has the latest MacBook and she's not a writer."

His words sink in. My book, *Red Lies*, is intact. My spirits brighten. My baby protected it.

I smile so broadly it hurts. "Thank you, Detective. And I think I will treat myself to a new laptop."

He nods approvingly, then wipes some soot off his face with the back of his hand. "We were also able to save Barbara Van Wyck's typewriter."

The red Selectric on which I wrote my suicide note. And admitted to stealing Barbara's manuscript. A cold chill runs through me.

"Was there anything in it?" I hedge.

"Zippo."

Phew! It must have burned along with the fake will. I breathe a sigh of relief. That hurts too. I must have sustained a lot of smoke damage to my lungs. But the good news is I'm alive. And so is my baby!

"Would you like us to return it to you?" he asks.

I shake my head from side to side. "No, just give it to Goodwill." I could donate it to The Village Bookstore or the Maplewood Library, but I honestly never want to see it again. I believe it's cursed.

One last dreaded question burns on my parched lips. “Did Logan make it?”

Strangely, for all he did to me, I hope he survived.

McGrath’s expression darkens. “Sorry. We couldn’t save... the little bastard.”

He pinches his lips and looks away. Did he try? I don’t ask. I don’t want to know the gory details. Whether he died of smoke inhalation or was burnt to a crisp or both. It’s hard enough to process that my husband is dead. That he was a psychopath. A cold-blooded murderer who killed his own mother and tried to kill me.

McGrath brushes a strand of hair off my face. His hand is calloused, but his touch is tender. “Sloan, don’t talk so much. Conserve your strength.”

A short silence between us ensues. I’m about to thank the detective again for all he’s done when a knife-like spasm slices through my gut. Then another and another.

McGrath hears my screams, sees my pained, contorted face.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his face as anxious as his voice.

“Detective, I’m having contractions! Going into labor!” For sure, the result of my trauma.

“Jesus!”

I see the panic writ large on his face. His ruddy complexion goes chalk-white. As white as a sheet of paper. He locks his eyes with the paramedic, who also looks alarmed.

The contractions come faster and faster. The pain sharpening. A full-term pregnancy is forty weeks. I’m only at thirty. It’s early July and I’m not due until mid-September.

On my next agonizing contraction, I let out a shuddery scream.

I fear for my baby’s life.

My life.

Then, I steel myself. Grit my teeth. Clench my fists.

Fight, Sloan. Fight.

With all we’ve been through, I’m not going to let fate get her way with life’s latest plot twist. Under the cover, I plunge my hand into Barbara’s coat pocket and clutch my lucky unicorn.

Then another excruciating contraction.

“Detective,” I hear the paramedic say. “Have you ever delivered a baby?”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

“Immersive and emotive.”

“Part haunting memoir, part bone-chilling thriller.”

“S.L. Whitman does it again. Outdoes herself with *Red Lies*.”

And my favorite: “A masterpiece of feminist horror.”

The many stellar reviews for *Red Lies* swim through my head as I push my bundled-up toddler down unchanged, vibrant Maplewood Avenue in her stroller, past my old apartment building en route to The Village Bookstore. Cantankerous old Mrs. Cruikshank no longer lives there. Making good on my promise, I bought her a roundtrip airline ticket to visit her daughter and grandkids in Florida, but she died in her sleep the day before she was supposed to depart. That’s karma for you. I did the right thing.

I inhale the faint scent of marijuana as I pass The Village Dispensary. It’s been over two years since I was last here. This is my child’s first time. Meet my daughter, Bea. My miracle child. Right after my contractions began in the back of the ambulance, we arrived at Saint Barnabas and I was rushed to the delivery room. I was in labor for fourteen hours; my poor little baby so wasn’t ready to see the world. The next afternoon at 12:12 p.m., I at last gave birth to her. A mere ten and a half inches, weighing all of three pounds. The tiniest, most exquisite creature I’d ever set eyes on. As tiny as she was, her cry was mighty. I named her Bea on the spot. B for

beautiful. B for Blip. B for just being. Detective McGrath stayed with me the whole time, and like me, he had tears streaming from his eyes when she came into the world.

Thanks to the hospital's renowned Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), she survived and thrived. While I remained in the hospital for a week to be treated for the injuries I incurred in the fire, which included a sprained ankle, mild smoke inhalation, and some second-degree burns, Bea remained there for two months and was finally released in September, weighing a healthy five pounds and three ounces. Her wonderful team had never seen such a fighter. I always knew my child was going to be a warrior. And she is. I love my fierce, feisty little girl more than anyone or anything in this world. More than life itself.

In addition to motherhood, my life has changed so much. I've started a new chapter, turned a new page. One of truth and transparency. While I still haven't told a soul that I stole Barbara Van Wyck's manuscript, going forward I will have nothing to hide. No more lies. I want to be a role model to my daughter. Teach her never to steal or lie.

I no longer suffer from writer's block. My inner muse is no longer a prisoner of my demons. The third book in my *Lies* series—*Gray Lies*—is already written and will be published next year. There is going to be one more. Lies come in many colors, but none of them is mightier than the truth. My next series is going to be called *Truth or Consequences*. And at some time, I'm going to write that young adult fantasy book about the dragon-riding princess and her hydrant-flying prince. The book my former agent, Clarisse, poo-pooed and turned down. My new agent, "Uncle Mario", loves it. I followed him when he left Clarisse and started his own literary agency. As flamboyant as ever, I adore him. And so does baby Bea, whom he mutually adores and spoils. He affectionately calls her Queen Bea because she rules.

I also no longer live in Manhattan. I sold my condo for a nifty profit (Dad was right about owning rather than renting) and bought a beautiful three-bedroom brownstone on a tree-lined street in Brooklyn. The best part, it has a backyard with a garden that my child can play in. I love living there. So does Moo, who loves to sit on the windowsill in the parlor and watch passersby and all the street

activity. The charming Park Slope neighborhood is filled with artsy professionals, many of them young parents with kids. While I work diligently from home, I've joined playgroups and the local gym. I've made friends and also volunteer at local cat adoption events on weekends. My publisher is nearby, as is Mario's office.

On the way here, I had our driver pass by Barbara's house. I've healed from that horrific life-and-death experience and was ready to see it. Though I didn't know what to expect. What it would look like. Or how I would feel.

To my surprise, I felt an eerie sadness. Evergreen is no more. The ginormous mansion has been totally razed. All that remains is its namesake tree, now charred and bearing a frightening resemblance to Barbara in her black mink coat with its gnarled, skeletal branches. The property, which is for sale, is overrun with weeds and brambles. For a second as I stared out the passenger seat window, I expected zombies to rise from the ashen lawn. Barbara in her black mink and Logan in his balaclava. The vision made me shiver. Other than the tree, all that stands is the massive wrought-iron gate and the pillars that flank it. One of the pillars has been marked with dripping blood-red paint as if someone tossed a can of paint at it. The pillar I shoved my once best friend Mackenzie into. With a shudder, I told our driver to move on.

As we cruised to our destination, The Village Bookstore, I gazed at Bea in her car seat, playing with her colorful activity toy, and observed how much she looks like my late husband, Logan, and his mother, Barbara, with her emerald green eyes and crown of copper red curls. I've decided I'm going to tell her one day about her legendary paternal grandmother. What a great writer she was and how she inspired me. That I named her after her. B is for Barbara too.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle. I've thought about this a lot. Its double meaning.

I'm not sure how I will explain how her grandmother died or what happened to her father. I've stopped using my hyphenated last name White-Peterson, and Bea shares only my maiden name, White. And my pen name. *Bea Whitman White*. Maybe the honest truth will be

best because lies can't stay buried in this social media world we live in.

The town of Maplewood hasn't changed one iota since I was here last. Though it's early January, the Christmas decorations are still up and the bustling village with its quaint stores still looks like it's straight out of a Charles Dickens novel.

There's already a huge line stretching out the door of The Village Bookstore to The Village Market, of people waiting to get my latest book, *Red Lies*, signed. Avoiding the crowd who will likely bombard me upon recognition, I use the back entrance to enter the store.

The owner, Marc Laroche, is there to greet me. With his now salt-and-peppered hair, he is more dashing than I remember. Dressed in his usual hip professorial way, he gives me a hug and congratulates me on the success of my new book. It's been on every bestseller list, translated into forty languages, and is set to be a Netflix series.

Marc casts his gaze on Bea, who is now occupying herself with a padded board book that makes animal sounds. "She's adorable," he says with a genuine smile. "I bet she's going to be a writer just like her *belle maman*."

He just called me beautiful. I blush at the compliment. God, he's handsome. And so sweet. How could I have possibly thought he was stalking me? And worse, murdered Barbara? He stops me from guilt-tripping.

"*Peut-être*, you would like to have dinner with me after the signing?"

I feel a tingling sensation. Something I haven't felt in ages. Since Logan's passing, I haven't dated.

The greatest truth I've learned: love is a lie.

Maybe it's time to stop with the jaded attitude.

I gaze down at my little one, then meet Marc's twinkling blue eyes. "As long as you don't think three is a crowd."

He laughs a warm, lovely laugh. "*Chérie*, it would be a total pleasure."

I feel myself heating as he tells me everything is set up for the signing.

Much like the last time I was here to sign *Black Lies*, I'm set up behind a table with different color Scripto pens as well as

bookplates. This time, however, my banner is set up easel-style behind me. The doors open for the signing and the eager fans storm in. The line goes out to the street.

With Blue, my lucky unicorn, perched on the table, I sign hardcover copies of *Red Lies* for one fan after another. Each gushing about how much they loved my new book. Some have also brought along copies of *Black Lies* to sign. If they only knew...

A half hour into the event, I hear a familiar gruff voice. "Hey, kiddo, lookin' good."

I look up. It's Detective McGrath and his lovely wife, Maureen. Bea's godparents. How could I not make them her godparents when I owe Detective McGrath my life? And my baby's. Moreover, they graciously let me convalesce at their house and every day took me to Saint Barnabas so I could spend time with baby Bea in the NICU.

"How's my favorite godkid?" asks the now retired detective, tickling Bea's pudgy tummy. She explodes with laughter. Nothing is sweeter than my baby's laughter.

"Everything's great, Frank." I now call him by his first name and soon Bea will be calling him Papa, and his wife, Mo-Mo.

"Frank and I went to see *Black Lies* last night," Maureen says, her Jersey accent as thick as her husband's. The movie version, directed by Greta Gerwig, has been a blockbuster, opening to rave reviews and record-breaking box office receipts. "It was so good!"

"Damn good," pipes up Frank.

"I'm so glad you both liked it." I myself haven't seen it, not wanting to be reminded of the unthinkable thing I did. The past is the past. Barbara is probably cursing at me from her grave. I can hear her husky, smoky voice. *I know what you did!*

But in addition to the terrible thing I did, I did something admirable. Redeemable. Something I hope Barbara will appreciate wherever her spirt lies. I gave a big chunk of my box office proceeds to the women's organization she championed. RAINN. Sometimes I still wonder who impregnated her, then abandoned her and her infant son.

"Sloan, would you be a sweetheart and sign my books?" Maureen asks, cutting into my musings. It's striking how much she looks like Barbara with her fiery red hair, high cheekbones, and

almond-shaped green eyes. While she's let her body go a bit, she must have been a beauty in her heyday. Frank must have had good taste when it came to women.

She's carrying a stack of five hardback copies of my book. I already sent her a signed book. It was the least I could do. She goes on to tell me she bought five additional copies from The Village Bookstore, for her book club. And to support the neighborhood indie bookstore. To keep Maplewood Village thriving.

She sets them on the table. Randomly picking up one of the books, I turn to the blank page across from my dedication to her husband. Before I sign it, I read the dedication for the umpteenth time.

For Frank McGrath, a hero if there ever was one. I owe you my life.

My smile never leaving, I sign the rest of her books. Just my pen name, big and scrolly.

Thanking me, she puts them one by one into the recycled canvas bag she's brought along. Then she picks up Bea from her stroller and showers her with kisses and endearments. Both she and Frank love her so much. I sometimes wonder why they never had kids. I've never asked.

As they're about to leave, I tell them to save a date. Tuesday, February 24. My thirty-third birthday. If it weren't for Frank, I'd not be celebrating another birthday. I'm hosting a casual dinner party at my house.

"We wouldn't miss it for the world," says Frank. "Want us to pick up Priscilla?"

I smile. "That would be wonderful." Logan's aunt has stayed in my life. The tragic end to his sad, broken life made us closer, creating a special bond between us. Best of all, she loves Bea, her grandniece, with all her heart. I warm at the memory of Aunt Prissy making cookies with my precious daughter the last time we visited. For the first time, there's joy in the sweet woman's life.

After exchanging hugs with me, Frank and Maureen depart. As they brush past Marc, a random thought flits into my head. Will he be coming to my birthday dinner too?

Catching his eyes on me, I continue signing books. About an hour in, I strap my black brace on my wrist, which still needs surgery. I just haven't found the time. Maybe I'll take care of it when my mother, as annoying as ever about my social life, and Cliff come up for a weeklong visit. A visit I'm not looking forward to because they'll be staying at my house. Four, for sure, is a crowd, especially with my busybody mom and her TV-addicted husband.

The line moves along, then thankfully begins to dwindle. My wrist is killing me and I'm excited to have dinner with Marc. Thankfully, a well-behaved Bea has fallen asleep in her stroller. After a short nap, she will be fine dinner company. She loves going to restaurants and eats just about everything.

Fizzing with excitement, I look up from the last book I signed and get a shock. Standing before me is a gaunt, haunted-looking man, who's hunched over a wheelchair with an equally gaunt young woman seated in it.

It's William Hayes, Evangeline Hayes's husband, and their daughter, Mackenzie, my former best friend. Her emaciated face is contorted, one eye drooping with a bubble of drool at the corner of her mouth. After I pushed her against the pillar flanking Barbara's wrought-iron gate, she was rushed to the emergency room where she was treated and remained in a coma for over a month. They thought she was brain dead, but wasn't. After coming out of the coma, she was sent to a rehabilitation facility where she was treated for brain damage and partial paralysis. I guess she recovered enough to be let out.

The very sight of her makes my stomach curdle. My legs turn to Jell-O. But it's what she's wearing that almost sends me over the edge. A long black mink coat that swallows her skeletal frame, and a silk Hermès scarf tied around her head like a kerchief. It's as if Barbara's specter has entered her body, occupying every cell. For a second, I see Barbara, her knowing emerald green eyes glinting wickedly at me. I blink several times to banish the hallucination.

Mackenzie faces me, her ghostly complexion pale, her eyes dilated and lifeless. Her withered legs peek out from the coat. On her lap is my book, *Red Lies*.

I swallow past the ache lodged in my throat. I can't form words. Finally, I squeak out a "Hi."

Mr. Hayes glowers at me. His voice gives me frostbite. "My daughter would like you to sign her book."

"Sure," I stammer. He takes it from her and hands it to me.

He looks down at his daughter, putting a hand on her bony shoulder. "Honey, tell her what you want her to write."

"Tell the world what you did," she drawls. The husky, androgynous voice is identical to the one that called in on that talk show two years ago. The one I thought was Barbara's.

They say the truth will set you free.

Or it will kill you.

I sign my name and close the book.

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EPILOGUE

The damp, cold air bites into me as I stand at the water's edge watching the fearsome white-crested waves come crashing in. They roar in my ears. A full moon illuminates the heavens and the rough sea below. The tide is high. The sea spray is like a specter dancing in the midnight sky.

The sea stares back at me, cold, infinite, and unforgiving. It knows what I did.

Barefoot, my pants rolled up to my knees, I narrowly miss being soaked by an incoming whitecap. It sweeps over my feet, sending an icy sting up my legs. I'm waiting for the perfect one to carry her soul out to sea. I don't know how long I've been here. I've lost all sense of time. Then in the distance, I see it. Mighty, fierce, and singular. A force of nature to be reckoned with. I'm spellbound by its enormity. By the size of its curl. It may be a tsunami—I should run—but my feet are glued to the coarse, wet sand. If it takes me, it's meant to be. But it doesn't.

Miraculously, it careens toward me and fizzles. With a prayer on my lips, I toss her ashes into the black foaming water and watch the untamed sea claim them, and carry them away. All that remains in my hand is a crystal ashtray. The one shaped like a seashell that I bought her from a souvenir shop on the way back to her apartment.

She was a beauty that one.

With her flaming red hair, feline green eyes, and a way with words.

And curves up the wazoo that belonged in the spread of a men's magazine. Or in a museum.

I met her at a dive bar in Atlantic City. Not far from here. I was a rookie on the force then and she was a cocktail waitress. Such a tease with her incredible body and all her double entendres. She invited me back to her place by the boardwalk. I couldn't wait to bed her.

All she wanted to do was read me an excerpt of the book she'd written. It had been optioned by a big publisher, and she told me she was going to become rich and famous. I still wanted a piece of her. More than ever.

She made me hard. So goddamn hard. I threw her onto the bed. Ripped off her clothes. Yanked off my pants. And thrust into her.

"Frankie, what the hell are you doing?" she screamed. Trying to fight me off, she kicked me with her heels and clawed me with her nails. Digging deep into my skin and drawing blood. Almost taking out an eye.

She went by Babs then. I didn't know her last name. Nor did she know mine.

Nine months later, the little bastard was born.

END

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INKUBATOR NEWSLETTER

We hope you enjoyed *All My Lies*. Sign up to the [Inkubator newsletter](#) (Nelle's publisher) to learn when her next book is out. You'll also get news of our other great mystery, thriller and suspense titles, and hear about special offers.

[Sign up at bit.ly/418obCy](http://bit.ly/418obCy)

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A LETTER FROM NELLE LAMARR

Dearest Reader~

Thank you so much for reading *All My Lies*. If you enjoyed it, it would mean so much to me if you left a review on Amazon. Regardless of length, reviews help others discover my books. And they help me to become an even better writer.

Leave a review

I absolutely LOVED writing *All My Lies*. I hope you can tell! Not only because it was about a writer and I could draw from my own personal experiences, but also because it is partly set in Maplewood, New Jersey, the charming town where I grew up. My late, beloved father owned a business there—a stationary store that sold greeting cards, newspapers, magazines, and all kinds of school supplies. He was well loved, and my sister and I often thought he should have run for mayor. But nothing made my dad, the *mensh*, happier than sitting behind his cash register, with my mom often beside him, and schmoozing with customers. He sold the business when he retired. Dad, this book is an ode to you. Written in loving memory of the man who taught me right from wrong.

Sadly, his beloved stationary store couldn't survive in this Amazon-driven world. The next owners went under. After being vacant for a

long time following Covid, 171 Maplewood Avenue is now a dispensary.

While writing this book, I took a research trip to Maplewood (and Manhattan where I also lived), and it's as charming as ever. The trip was very nostalgic and brought back lots of fond memories.

While preserving the charm and layout of Maplewood, I did take some creative liberties. Most of the stores in The Village have distinct names and there is a Chinese restaurant. There is no Maplewood High School, but rather a venerable, top-rated high school called Columbia High. And the local bookstore is called Word and it's not owned by a Frenchman.

I'm going to share something else with you. Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, aka Carolyn Keene, the prolific author of many Nancy Drew books as well as *The Hardy Boys* series, was a regular customer at my dad's store. She walked there daily to buy her *Newark News* and *New York Times*. Nancy Drew was my all-time favorite series and still is; my babysitter's mother gave me a set of the first editions complete with the original illustrated bookplates. I devoured every book, often in less than a day, then begged my mom to take me to Gimbel's where she let me buy the more recent Grosset & Dunlap versions. I wanted to be Nancy and had a crush on her boyfriend Ned. The books inspired my writing career as I was always turning them into plays or movies.

One of the highlights of my childhood was meeting the elegant septuagenarian, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams at my dad's store. She gave me a signed copy of *The Hidden Staircase*, my favorite Nancy Drew book. I still have it and treasure it. I told her I, too, wanted to be a writer and the advice she gave me was "Read! Read! Read! And don't be afraid to write your story."

While writing this book, I did more research on her and learned her birthday was the same as mine. December 12th. Kismet, *n'est-ce pas?* I was utterly blown away when I made this discovery. I so wish

we could meet up again and I could give her a signed copy of *All My Lies*.

I loved writing Sloan. She's an ordinary woman who has extraordinary things happen. I loved writing her journey of becoming a successful writer and mom. There's a lot of my personality in her. My insecurities as well as my strengths. I hope you loved her snarky sense of humor as much as I loved writing it. Would you be interested in reading a five-years later sequel (*All His Lies*)—the next chapter in Sloan's life? Please let me know. The best way to reach me is via email: nellelamarr@gmail.com. I love hearing from my readers and always personally respond. Who knows... you may end up getting a signed paperback in the mail.

If you are a first-time reader, please check out my other highly rated psychological suspense thrillers—*The Family Guest* and *The Night Nanny*.

Also, if you like your suspense with a smattering of romance, check out my romantic suspense novels written under my pen name, Nelle L'Amour... *Remember Me*, a ripped from the headlines #MeToo story, and *Jane Deyre*, my contemporary retelling of an all-time favorite, *Jane Eyre*, which I sneaked into *All My Lies*. (Please forgive my shameless self-promotion!) Both are highly rated and loved by readers. I also write contemporary romance, romantic comedies, and the occasional tearjerker. And under my pen name, E.L. Sarnoff, I write romantasy. You can find all my books on my website where you can sign up for my personal newsletter informing you of new releases and sales.

www.nellelamour.com

In addition to following me on social media (links listed in *About the Author*), I invite you to join my fun Facebook reader group, Nelle's Belles.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1943750875863015>

Thank you again for choosing to read *All My Lies*. There are a lot of great books out there to choose from, and I so greatly appreciate you chose mine. I can't wait to bring you my next one.

Always remember, you are the reason I write.

MWAH!~Nelle

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*Claire Milto, for being Inkubator's indomitable Rock of Gibraltar and mine too.

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Writing is often a very lonely, singular experience, but I am blessed to have many fellow writers as dear friends who cheer me on. I couldn't live without Arianne Richmonde, Auden Dar, Adriane Leigh, and Liz Grace (L.G.) Davis, who endlessly pump me up and make me laugh even in the most desperate of times. I love all of you. An honorable mention goes to Mark Jenkins who has been so supportive and graciously allowed me to promote my books in his dynamic Facebook group, Thriller Readers Book Club.

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of *All My Lies*. Believe me, she's a tough, honest critic, and she loved this thriller, calling it "a joy to read." She told me she didn't guess the final twist—which is rare for her. Thank you, dear Freida, for being my friend and mentor.

I also want to thank the lovely, talented authors who graciously read and blurred, *All My Lies*—Nicola Sanders, Shalini Boland, and Miranda Rijks. I owe you one! Do yourself a favor and read their books! You'll love them and thank me. You're welcome!

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And thank you to my daughters who are thoroughly supportive of my crazy writing career. Though he won't read this, a big shout-out also goes to our cat, Moo, who was the inspiration for Sloan's black and white cat. I told my hubby we need to put him on the Keto diet.

Last but not least, a massive shout out to all my readers. Thank you to everyone who has read my books, written a review, sent me an email, and/or spread the word on social media or to friends.

You are the reason I write.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nelle Lamarr is the psychological suspense pen name for Nelle L'Amour, a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling romance author, who has sold over one million books worldwide and has been an Amazon All-Star. Her critically acclaimed psychological thrillers have been translated into multiple languages. The German edition of her debut thriller, *The Family Guest*, published by Harper Collins/Germany, was an instant Spiegel list bestseller.

Her books feature complex, multidimensional characters and jaw-dropping twists you won't see coming. A former executive in the entertainment industry with a blockbuster children's television series to her credit, she lives in Los Angeles, California, with her Prince Charming-ish husband, beautiful twin princesses, and a bevy of royal pain-in-the-butt pets. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading gripping thrillers by her favorite authors with a cup of coffee or glass of wine.



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