

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES



A  
~~WELCOME~~  
REUNION  
A SHORT STORY

**LUCINDA BERRY**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE PERFECT CHILD

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# CHAPTER ONE

## PIPER

I'd lose my job if anyone knew I was here, but nothing could keep me away from this moment. Absolutely nothing. I had to see the child killer. Excuse me, the reformed child killer. Because that's who she was now.

Janie Bauer.

Except she didn't go by that anymore. She shed the name like she'd shed the diagnoses attached to it. At least that's what she said in her bestselling memoir, *Born Again*, that came out last week and set the world ablaze with her story all over again. The book skyrocketed to the number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list and would probably stay there. People were fascinated with Janie's story. How could you not be?

Her story spoke to one of the scariest questions in the universe: Could a child be born bad? And if so—if there really was such a thing as a bad seed—could you turn them good? According to Janie, you could. She swore that's what the years of institutions and treatment centers had done for her.

My eyes furtively scanned the room, searching for Christopher. They referred to him as her adoptive father because of the book, but he and Hannah had terminated their parental rights years ago when they turned her over to the state. He wasn't supposed to be here either. I stood on my tiptoes, trying to spot him. The media and press stood in the back while the audience filled the seats, eagerly waiting for Sarah Haines to cut back from commercial. She'd traveled all the way from New York to interview Janie, and it was the closest thing to a celebrity we'd ever had visit our small town in Ohio. It was too crowded for me to pick out Christopher, but he was here. He had to be. He couldn't stay away from Janie any more than I could.

This wouldn't be the first time I'd run into him in places he shouldn't be. Our paths had crossed numerous times over the years. Sometimes in the online forums, the ones endlessly dissecting her case. Once with the true-crime podcaster who swore he'd found Janie's father. Christopher showed up as an anonymous caller on that one, but I'd recognized his voice almost immediately. I'd spotted him outside the courtroom at her first parole hearing. Forced to sit in the hallway, just like me. I would've loved to be inside, but juvenile hearings were closed to anyone not on the case. I'd been booted off the moment negligence charges were filed against the county, since I was the original social worker assigned to the case.

Hannah Bauer was the only person not trying to cram into this room and get the first look at Janie in person. Hannah never fully recovered from what happened. How could she? Adopting an abandoned child and taking them into your home only to have them turn into a demon and shove your sister down the stairs, killing her? And yes, as a seasoned and decorated social worker—the director of the entire program at Oakwood Solutions—I wasn't supposed to say that about a kid. And before Janie, I never would've said that about any child. But after? She'd changed how I saw kids. She changed all of us.

As if on cue, dramatic music started, and a hush fell over the crowd. The anticipation as thick as if the president of the United States was arriving. Sarah rose. Everyone hypnotically followed Sarah's gaze as Janie glided her way into the room and took a seat center stage.

I'd seen her pictures plastered all over social media and in every article they'd written about her since her release. Watched all her TikToks even though I was way too old to be on there. But something about seeing her in person after all these years sucker punched me in the stomach. She always looked radiant and amazing in her videos, but I'd assumed it was due to the magic of filters. It wasn't. She was stunning. The take-your-breath-away kind of gorgeous that made people dangerous, especially people like her.

Janie smiled, and I immediately flashed back to the rotten-toothed grin she had when they first discovered her in a Walmart parking lot all those years ago wearing only a diaper and a dog collar. She'd been filthy, covered in scars and blood. Her body told a painful tale of years ravaged by abuse and neglect, but you'd never guess she'd ever looked like that. She

practically sparkled in front of the camera. Her skin had that dewy glow reserved for the young. Her eyes were still the palest of blues.

“Thanks for having me on, Sarah,” she said politely. She still hadn’t looked in the direction of the audience. Her eyes were fixed on Sarah.

“I’m so glad you’re here, and I can’t wait to talk about your incredible memoir.” Sarah gave Janie a huge smile as she grabbed the book off the stand in front of her, and held it up for everyone to see. The camera zoomed in on the cover: Janie wearing a flowing white gown, coming out of a bathtub like she’d just been baptized, with a heart chakra pulsating in her chest. The symbolism of the entire image wasn’t lost on anyone. I was on my third read through the book, analyzing and dissecting every word just like all the book clubs and true-crime junkies around the world. That’s all we’d been doing since the book came out. Strategically timed within weeks of her turning eighteen and her subsequent release from the juvenile justice system. The entire thing was brilliant marketing, which only made me doubt her authenticity more.

Sarah still hadn’t looked at the audience either. It was like she and Janie were the only two people in the room. No one knew why Janie had picked Sarah out of the long line of people begging her for an exclusive interview. Maybe it was because of their matching eyes. Sarah’s were as mesmerizing as Janie’s. “I just want to say that I read this book in one sitting. I was blown away by your story, and I understand why it’s had such an impact on the world. You’re so lucky to be alive, and I just want to take a moment to acknowledge that before we get started.” Sarah’s voice was tender and kind. Janie’s eyes filled with gratitude.

“Thank you for saying that. Lots of people just see me as a monster.” Her eyes welled with tears, but crying didn’t have the same effect on me as it did other people. Not after three decades on the front lines of social services. Sarah was moved, though, and she placed her hand gently on Janie’s knee.

“You’ve been through some terrible things that nobody, least of all a child, should ever have to go through, and I’m really sorry those things happened to you.” Sarah’s voice warbled with emotion. That’s why Janie’s book was so popular. So much of her story was true. She’d been the worst case of child abuse and neglect I’d ever seen. Still to this day. That part was fact, and she described it vividly—tied with zip ties in a dark closet, a dog collar around her neck to shock her into submission or sometimes just to toy

with her for fun, barely fed, never let into the outside world. Kept in filth and rot. And on and on it went. Her Adverse Childhood Experience score was off the charts. It was why Christopher had fallen head over heels in love with her when the police and paramedics brought her into the hospital where he worked. Why Hannah had given up her dreams of having a baby to help her. Janie didn't just tug at your heartstrings—she pulled them straight out.

Janie flashed Sarah another charming smile. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Having acknowledged your experience, you got into a lot of trouble after you were removed from the Bauers, didn't you?” Sarah wasted no time getting down to the issues. The ones Janie had carefully glossed over in the book, no matter how forthcoming she'd been in other parts. She didn't like talking about her roommates.

Janie's smile vanished quickly and was replaced with a frown. “Here's what people need to understand. Yes, I really struggled after I was abandoned by the Bauers. They were the closest thing I ever had to a real family. The first time I had hope, so it devastated me when they didn't want me anymore.”

Her choice of words was a careful manipulation of the facts. She hadn't been abandoned by the Bauers. She'd been removed while the state investigated child-abuse charges against Christopher and Hannah because they'd been in the emergency room with her so many times. They placed her with Hannah's sister, Allison, during the investigation, and that's when everything really went to hell. Spiraled so badly that after Janie overheard Allison having a conversation about moving Janie somewhere else, she'd pushed her down the stairs.

Sarah held out the book. It was dog eared and filled with neon Post-its. “On page thirty-eight you say, ‘They threw me away like a broken toy they didn't want to take the time to fix.’” She released a slow, deep breath, glanced at the camera, then back to Janie. “Wow.”

It was exactly how I felt when I read it. I'd been shocked to discover how Janie framed her story. Even though she had an extensive trauma history and had only lived with the Bauers for a short time—barely over a year—most of the narrative centered around them. She didn't spend nearly as much time talking about the years she'd spent locked up like an animal in a closet or how she'd somehow managed to slice her biological mom's

throat when she was only five years old. Janie's narrative was all about redemption. How she'd been rescued by the Bauers when they thought they could help her, but how they'd thrown her away when they didn't think they could fix her. That's when she'd gone through her darkest hours, and it was in that place that she'd discovered the strength she needed to be her own savior. Or so she said.

Janie cleared her throat. She twirled her hands in her lap while she spoke. "You have to understand what it was like for me. To be told you were going to be loved unconditionally, finally, after all those years of being mistreated? Well, that was like my dream come true. It was everything I'd wished for, and believe me"—she gave her first tentative glance at the camera—"I wished on everything to get out of that closet. For a while, there was this little hole in the far right corner. Just the smallest pinprick. But sometimes, during the night, if the moon hit it just right, the tiniest bit of light would break into my darkness, and I would beg God to send me a family. A real one. I thought God had answered my prayers with the Bauers." Her eyes filled with tears again. "They were my family. My heroes, and they abandoned me the moment things got tough."

"I can see the pain on your face. How much this still hurts you," Sarah said as she handed her a Kleenex. "Is that why you hurt your roommate at New Horizons Correctional Facility?"

Janie's eyes briefly flashed with something before she quickly wiped them clean and explained, "Hurting people hurt other people, and I'm not sure there was a little girl on the planet who was in more pain than me. So yes, I lashed out. I took it out on the people around me at the time."

"Well, you did a bit more than take it out on other people." Sarah gave a slight side-eye to the audience, and I breathed a sigh of relief that she'd actually done some research besides just reading Janie's book. "You snipped off your roommate's earlobe with a nail clipper, and you crushed another resident behind the washing machine, breaking three of their ribs and collapsing their lung."

If staff hadn't come back to the laundry room in time, Janie would've added another murder to her belt. She would've been the youngest person to have committed three murders. But for some reason, that incident didn't bother me like the nail clipper. Attacking someone was impulsive and aggressive. Stealing a nail clipper from a nurse's purse was deliberate.



Snipping off your own earlobe first so no one would suspect you of hurting your roommate was cunning. That's what made my skin crawl.

"Did you miss the first four chapters?" Janie cocked her head to the side without missing a beat. She wasn't even flustered. "The ones where I describe being a sociopath?" She popped her lips out. Smoothed her ponytail. "I never denied being a troubled kid. I was a severely disturbed child. But I didn't have to stay one. You can't be broken forever when you're seven."

I gasped. Christopher used to say the same thing. He was just as adamant as she was.

"Everyone deserves second chances?" Sarah tilted her head back at her.

"Everyone." Janie nodded dramatically. "No matter how bad things are or what we've done, we can always start over. There's always hope."

"Is that the message of your book?"

"I guess if I had to sum it up in one sentence, I'd say it's a book about hope and redemption, yes. That everyone deserves a second chance, no matter what they've done."

"And you believe you deserve a second chance?"

"Absolutely."

"Fair enough." Sarah nodded back. "In the spirit of second chances and new beginnings, the very thing this entire book is about, I've arranged a special guest for today's show." She turned her head toward the camera and the audience, speaking to us like Janie wasn't sitting a few feet away from her. "There's someone special here to meet with you, and I think it's time we brought them out." Sarah's eyes lit with a surprise that took Janie completely off guard. Either it was truly unexpected or she was an incredibly good actress.

"I'm so excited. I can't imagine who you've brought. There are so many people I want to connect with again." Janie's smile was wide as she spoke, but it was frozen on her face, and she wasn't blinking.

Was it Christopher? Was that why I hadn't spotted him? But there was no way. He couldn't go anywhere near her, no matter how badly he wanted to. The conditions of his plea bargain were that he have no contact with her, and he wouldn't risk it. Not after how hard he'd worked to keep his medical license after the trial.

Sarah gave a quick nod to stage left, and Caleb Ross walked on set. Unless you'd followed the case closely from the beginning, you wouldn't recognize him. But I did—Janie killed his mom.

# CHAPTER TWO

## HANNAH

“Did you go see her?” I whipped open the door and threw myself in front of Christopher. I’d rushed to the entryway as soon as I heard his car in the driveway.

His face didn’t falter at the sight of me. He’d been expecting as much. “I did,” he said softly. Dark bags circled his eyes. He’d barely slept all week.

When he left for work this morning, he said he still hadn’t decided if he was going to the live interview, but that was probably his weak attempt at supporting me. I wanted nothing to do with Janie, the book, or her stupid redemption story.

“Did you watch it?” he asked, like I might’ve changed my mind, but there wasn’t a single part of me that’d been tempted to turn it on.

I shook my head. “Of course not.” I’d severed ties with all things Janie years ago. Chopped her off like an infection that was moving through my body and threatening my other organs. It was the only thing I could do if I wanted to survive, and I had to go on for my son, Cole. He was still the reason I got up in the morning.

Part of me had hoped today would be the day Christopher chose me. He knew how I felt about Janie being back. Out. Living so close to us. She was free to live anywhere she wanted to live in this entire state. Finally free. And she chose Clarksville, Ohio? Please. There was only one reason she was here, and that was to toy with us. He was only feeding into her hand, but he’d always been blinded by her. Like a stupid, lovestruck teenager.

I turned on my heels and stomped away, storming into the living room. He followed behind me, speaking fast. “Listen, Hannah, I’m sorry you’re upset. I really am. I hate making you upset. You know that, but I needed to

go and be there in person to see how I felt. Get some kind of closure. I don't know. It just . . . it just was important for my healing, okay? Remember what the therapist said?" He eyed me cautiously. Anything related to our marriage therapy could be a land mine. One triggered by almost anything.

He wasn't sorry for going to see Janie, only that he hurt me by doing it, and that was the problem. She'd cast a spell on him in a way he'd never be free of. Our experiences were nothing alike, and I hated every time he tried to pretend like they were. In some ways, I'd lost all respect for him. Respect I'd never get back.

Janie wasn't like other children, and I'd known that from the moment I laid eyes on her at the hospital. There was something wrong with her that no amount of mothering or loving could fix. I'd accepted that fact. Christopher never had. Even to this day. That's because she'd always been his. She'd never truly been mine. But the two of them? It'd been love at first sight from the moment they met in the emergency room. He'd always been so much more than her doctor, and there was no severing that bond. Even after all this time had passed.

"Hannah, she didn't abuse herself." That's what he said whenever we got into the argument over culpability, which we still resurrected every few years. We'd never fully work her poison out of our system.

And it was true. Janie had been tied in a closet and fed dog food most of her life. Her multiple broken bones were what led Christopher to her in the first place. He'd done her surgery. It didn't matter to me, though. She was broken beyond repair. It didn't matter if she was born that way or her mother made her that way. Whatever was wrong with her, you could no longer fix it, and I didn't feel sorry for her, even if everyone else did.

"She killed my sister." I gave the same response too. Just like him. And that's where we always stopped. That was the impasse, and I had no desire to go there again right now.

I turned around to face Christopher in the living room and took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. "Well, how was it?" I asked because despite how I felt, I could tell he was upset.

"The place was packed. Tickets sold out and people were lined up around the block *still* trying to get in. I don't know who thought it was a good idea to have it at the library. Anyway, they talked a lot about the book, and I can tell you more specifics if you want, but it was all focused around

what happened to her when she was a child, and what she's done over the years to get better." He eyed me cautiously. "You want any more than that?"

I shook my head. Christopher's other favorite thing to fling at me during our fights was that I liked seeing her as a monster. How I wouldn't take in any other information that suggested she might have a heart. Maybe in the beginning, yes, but if it'd ever been true, it stopped being true years ago. I just didn't want to know her or know about her.

"Okay, well, besides that, there was a special guest they brought out," he said.

A special guest? The producers hadn't said anything about having any guests on besides us when they talked to us about doing the show. We were supposed to be it. They asked us to come have a big reconciliation meeting with Janie, and we'd declined immediately without even thinking about it. Can you imagine? Seeing her again for the first time on live TV? It would've been great TV, though. That's the only reason Janie was doing any of this.

"Who'd they find to replace us?" I asked. As much as Christopher might toy with a homecoming with Janie, he definitely wasn't trying to have it in front of a crowd and played out for the entire world to see. "One of her old preschool teachers? Oh my god, was it Dr. Chandler? It was, wasn't it? That's who they found." I clapped my hand over my mouth. Her former therapist during the time she lived with us would be scandalous.

Christopher shook his head, and I realized how upset he really was. He looked like he used to look when he stumbled out of an eighteen-hour surgery. "Janie wants to—"

I jumped in to interrupt. I couldn't help myself. "So, we're going to just keep calling her Janie even though she changed her name to Hope?" I still couldn't believe it. I literally almost fell out of my chair when I saw the headline on NPR: "*Born Again*, written by Hope Devonshire." Come on. Could you be more narcissistic? It made me want to throw up.

"Yes, that's what we're doing. There's no way I'm calling her Hope," Christopher responded. At least we agreed on that. He'd been just as shocked at the name change and thought it equally ridiculous. He cleared his throat. "Hannah, maybe you should sit down for this." He motioned to the couch behind me.

"I don't want to sit down." What was he trying to prepare me for? My mouth went dry. I couldn't swallow.

“Sarah brought Caleb on the show to talk to Janie.”

“Caleb? My nephew Caleb?” I asked in disbelief, as if there were any other Calebs we knew. He nodded solemnly. Caleb and Janie had something in common—they’d both seen his mom’s dead face. The paramedics found him lying on top of her. The neighbors all the way at the end of the street heard him screaming. It was a sound they said they’d never forget. “What was he doing there? Is Janie talking to him? Do they hang out together? Oh my god, please tell me they don’t hang out together. What about—” He put his hand up to stop me so he could explain more.

“From what I could tell and what Sarah said, today was the first time they’d seen each other. Now, that could be total bullshit. It’s live TV, and they stage things all the time, but it sounded legit to me. Janie looked genuinely surprised to see him.”

“What’d they talk about?” My head spun with possible scenarios. Did Greg know? Had he gone to the show? I’d only seen Allison’s husband, Greg, twice in ten years. He’d taken all his grief about losing her and channeled it into hating me. He blamed me for all of it—bringing Janie into their lives to begin with and not telling them about all the problems she had. Which wasn’t entirely true, but the actual facts didn’t matter. He wouldn’t let me have anything to do with my twin nephews—Caleb and Dylan—after Allison died, even though I’d been in the delivery room when they were born and was the closest thing they had to a mother after they lost theirs. He cut me out of their lives like I was a malignant tumor. The boys had started coming around when they were teenagers and Greg couldn’t control their choices anymore. Neither of them had said anything about being on the show.

“It was a pretty disturbing conversation.” Deep lines of grief carved into his forehead. His gaze rolled to the floor. “They talked about things I had no idea happened, so it caught me off guard. I thought her book was supposed to be a tell-all memoir, but none of the stuff the two of them talked about today was in there.”

“None of what? What happened? What kind of things?”

Christopher paused for a second, like he was second-guessing whether he wanted to tell me, and I shot him a pointed look to continue. “All the stuff Janie did to him when they were kids.”

During one of our last conversations, Allison had mentioned she didn’t leave Janie alone with the boys because she’d been sexually inappropriate

with Caleb, but it was more of a “playing doctor” and “didn’t understand boundaries” kind of thing. Or so we thought. We’d been worried about Janie influencing them in a negative way, but never believed she’d physically hurt them, because she was four years younger and so much smaller. She was super tiny for her age. It’s why the police thought she was a toddler when they’d found her wandering in the parking lot like a feral child. Years of malnutrition and neglect assured she’d never physically develop into what she should’ve been.

“What’d she do?” I asked, bracing myself for the answer.

“Well, for starters, she crept into his room while he was sleeping and peed on him. Right on his face. Once, he woke up and her hands were around his neck. She squeezed until he was almost unconscious, and when she let go, she was giddy. Asked him to describe what it felt like to almost die.” He worked his jaw while he talked. How was it possible that after all these years, she still had the ability to shock him? As if he was surprised that she was so sick. He swallowed hard and continued. “Another time, they were riding bikes—apparently, at our house, even—and he fell. Skinned up his knee and elbow pretty bad. I actually think I remember the accident because it was a nasty wipeout. Anyway, doesn’t matter. She asked to touch his wounds and then licked the blood off her finger. Said she wanted to know what it tasted like. There were other things too. Like how she made him eat already-chewed food, and she’d pinch him so hard while they were playing that she left bruises.”

“How’d she get him to do any of that, and why didn’t he tell his parents?” It sounded so much like victim blaming, but it didn’t make sense. Obviously, he couldn’t control her sneaking into his bedroom at night, but all the other stuff? Why not go to his parents immediately? The twins had a great relationship with their parents. As far as I knew, Dylan still did with Greg, even though Caleb only had a relationship with his pills.

“One night she woke him up and made him follow her into his parents’ bedroom. She stood over their bed with a knife she’d gotten from the kitchen, and showed him how easy it would be to walk in there while they were sleeping and slit their throats. She cut the pillow next to Allison’s head for good measure. She told him she’d kill his parents if he ever told.”

I brought my hand up to my mouth. Allison had mentioned the pillowcase to me. She asked for my appliance repair guy because her washing machine had started tearing up her clothes. She said it’d put a

huge, gaping hole in one of her new linen shams. Hate surged through my body. It didn't feel right or natural to hate a child, but I did. I couldn't help it.

"So glad she's been able to turn herself around from all that," I said. Bitterness lined every word. The strange look hadn't left his face. There was more. I knew him well enough to know when he wasn't telling me something. "What is it?"

"You might want to sit down," he said pointing to the couch again like he'd done at the beginning of our conversation.

"No." I shook my head, growing more frightened by the second. "What's going on? What aren't you telling me? Christopher?" My voice rose with each syllable.

"Hannah, just sit."

"I'm not going to sit down, and stop treating me like I'm a child!" I yelled. He'd never stop treating me like I was some fragile piece of porcelain that might shatter any second. I hated it.

He exhaled slowly. "I know you haven't read the book and don't want to hear anything about what's in it, but Janie's working with a recovery coach, and part of her therapy is making amends to the people she hurt when she was young." He paused, taking a deep breath to gather himself before continuing in a somber tone. "Janie said she was glad Sarah had Caleb on the show because she has a long list of people she's making amends to, and he's on it. You and me are the first people on the list. She kept saying she needed to clean up her side of the street. It was like she'd joined some weird kind of AA and was working a—"

"We're not having any kind of conversation with that girl. And besides, she doesn't want to talk to me anyway. She's only interested in you. She doesn't—"

He cut me off before I spiraled further. "I know that. Nobody said anything about us talking to her, but Hannah . . . she . . . she wants to meet with Cole." He swallowed hard. "It sounds like they've already been talking."

His words dropped like a bomb into the living room. My baby? She was coming after my baby? Air whooshed violently in my ears. The world felt shaky underneath my feet. He was right. I should've sat down.

"What do you mean, she's been talking to Cole?" I could barely get the words out. The idea that she'd gotten close to him, touched his life



again, stole the air from my lungs. Put all my senses on high alert.

It wasn't just that Janie was talking to our son. The one I thought she was trying to kill, so I'd tried to drown her in our bathtub before she could, all those years ago. The entire reason she'd been staying with Allison in the first place. That was just one part of the problem. The bigger issue was that we'd never told Cole about Janie or what happened to me. We'd kept all of it a secret. It was a conscious decision Christopher and I made together.

Cole hadn't been born yet when we brought her home from the hospital, and he was three months old when they took her away. It was a part of our life that we didn't talk about. At least never with him. We didn't talk about the Janie days in the same way veterans didn't talk about their war days. Sometimes you got through tough things by putting them behind you, and that's all we wanted to do with everything that happened with Janie—put her behind us.

We weren't in denial about it, and it wasn't this shameful secret we needed to bury away. It was just that if we told him, she'd forever be part of our family history, and after we'd somehow scratched and clawed together some semblance of a life after all the loss, we just wanted a fresh start. He was so young when all of it went down, and he had no recollection of her. Up until a few years ago, when my nephews came back into the picture, he didn't have anyone in his life who'd known Janie, and by the time he was a toddler, people in the community had stopped talking about it. So, we thought we'd be safe.

But the world was a lot different now.

How'd he find out? Did it matter? Stupid internet. God, I hated it sometimes.

Christopher looked nervous. "I'm not sure what any of it means. Janie just said they'd been talking, and it was right at the end of the segment, so maybe she threw it in there as a chance to get back on the show?" He ran his hands through his hair. "Apparently, they've been messaging on Instagram for a couple months. She says he reached out to her first."

"She's lying. There's no way he reached out to her first. He doesn't even have an Instagram account." Cole had just gotten his first phone for his thirteenth birthday in March, and there were lots of rules to make sure he kept it. The number one rule being he wasn't allowed on any social media until he was sixteen. We had all the parental controls in place to make sure he wasn't.

Christopher sheepishly shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. That’s just what she said.” He shrugged again. “Maybe she’s lying. God, I hope she’s lying.” He rubbed his chin. “But no matter what, we’re going to have to talk to him about all of it, Hannah.”

“Of course,” I snapped. My blood boiled. Janie destroyed my family once. She wasn’t getting close enough to do it again.

# CHAPTER THREE

## HANNAH

I hurried around the corner of Bayside Counseling, and nearly smacked into Piper. I jumped back in surprise. So did she. We both stopped in our tracks.

“What are you . . . are you . . . but I . . .” I stumbled over my words at seeing her so unexpectedly and out of context. Her graying roots had turned to white and worked their way all through her hair. She looked like a different person, with short hair cut close and framing her face, not the messy bun on top of her head like she had in all my memories. It was slightly disorienting. We just stood there, awkwardly staring at each other and saying nothing while I tried to catch my breath.

“Did you see her?” Piper finally asked, breaking the silence and motioning to the building behind us. The one I’d been standing outside of for the last forty-five minutes.

“Only for a second.” But it’d shaken me to my core. I’d planned all these things to say to Janie—how I would tell her to stay away from my family, that I’d file charges against her if she kept talking to Cole, even threatening her—but all that disappeared the moment she was in front of me. She jumped out of an Uber, chattering away on her phone in the same singsong voice she used as a little girl, and I just froze. All I could do was stare as she walked down the sidewalk, holding her phone out to get the best angle of herself on the screen. I hadn’t moved until she’d gone inside. “Can we walk around the corner? I don’t want her to see us.”

Piper had no business being here either. Was she here for the same reason? Had she been here before? Following Janie since she got out? I really hoped so. The possibility of Piper keeping an eye on her was the best news I’d heard all day.

Figuring out how to find Janie hadn't been hard. Last night, after Christopher told me about her speaking to Cole, I took a deep dive into her life. I read her stupid memoir straight through and hated everything about it, just like I knew I would. The way she portrayed herself as such a victim throughout the entire thing. She must've called herself a child-abuse victim every other paragraph. And maybe other people felt sorry for her because she had such a horrible beginning, and believe me, if anybody understood what that pull was like, it was me. I'd been swept away by my desire to help her. Given up everything. Even having other children so that I could be her mom and focus all my attention solely on her. But Janie was broken. Damaged goods.

I held back the urge to run. Being so close to her brought back the crawling-out-of-my-skin feeling from years ago. What would she do if she saw us together? I kept glancing over my shoulder as we walked toward the end of the street. Would she be mad? Feel threatened? Would that make her hurt Cole?

We rounded the corner, and Piper slowed, turning to look at me. "You want to get a cup of coffee? There's a really cute coffee shop over on Third."

I pointed to the bar across the street—Stub's Pub. "How about a drink?" I asked, even though it wasn't noon yet.

She laughed. "I like how you think. Much better."

She linked arms with me, and we hurried across the street without talking. We quickly ordered our drinks, then made a beeline to the corner. It was like every small-town college bar in America, and it was perfect because no one would even notice us. We just looked like two moms visiting our kids and waiting for them to get out of class.

I grabbed my beer and drained half the glass even though I hadn't eaten all day. "I didn't expect to be so triggered by seeing her in person, but there was something about the sound of her voice that flipped me upside down." She used to speak the same way to Christopher as she had on the phone. Innocent. Sweet. Girly. Except she wasn't a little girl anymore. She was all grown up, but in my mind, she was still six years old. Staring down at my sister and watching her die with her black, psychotic eyes. "Seeing her like an adult. I don't know, it's just weird. Unsettling."

"Well, I can assure you, she's the same old Janie." Piper snorted.

“Did you go to the show?” I asked her, just like I’d asked Christopher, already knowing the answer.

She nodded. “I did, and it was something else. You?”

“No, but I’ve watched it twice since then.” Everything changed the moment Cole entered the scenario. I needed to know exactly what was happening. Both times I’d been drawn to the same parts.

Janie was so poised and confident from the moment she walked on the stage, but I wasn’t surprised. She was always the most comfortable when she was in the spotlight. It was startling how much she’d changed, though. She’d transformed into this beautiful young lady, articulate and composed. That was the part I couldn’t get over. Still couldn’t.

I’d watched in stunned horror as she crossed her legs and folded her hands on her lap. Batted her eyes at the camera. Twirled her hands and described how we’d abandoned her when she needed us the most. “I just wish Christopher and Hannah would’ve tried to get me the help I so desperately needed. I’ve never understood why they didn’t. It’s not like they couldn’t afford it.”

“She’s lying!” I’d screamed at the TV.

She was a liar. That’s all she knew how to do. You couldn’t trust a word that came out of her mouth. We’d spent hundreds of thousands of dollars getting her help. Not only had we brought her to therapy and specialized schools when she lived with us, we’d been responsible for paying for her residential psychiatric care for three years until the state finally released us from our parental rights.

But she didn’t mention any of that. She just kept right on going, spinning her web of deceit. “If it hadn’t been for Hannah, Christopher probably would’ve gotten me the help I needed. He was always the stable one.” She leaned forward in her chair like they were alone in Sarah’s living room sharing a bottle of wine and she was about to share her juiciest secret. “Here’s the thing—Hannah wasn’t well. My therapist explained she’s one of those women that’s more in love with the idea of being a parent than actually being one. She wasn’t prepared to share Christopher’s attention with me and saw it as a threat. It’s one of the core features of personality-disordered mothers, and he thinks that’s what was going on with Hannah. If they’d done a full psychological evaluation on the Bauers before allowing them to adopt me, he’s pretty sure they would’ve found her pathology, and denied their application.”

“They didn’t do a psychological evaluation? Isn’t that standard procedure with all adoptive parents?” Sarah asked, looking horrified.

“Yes!” I yelled, wanting to grab the TV and rip it off the wall. Social workers and psychologists scoured every corner of our lives, including our psyches. We sat through hours of testing. Answered hundreds of questions.

But Janie just shrugged and feigned ignorance. “I guess they didn’t follow normal procedure because my case was so unusual? They must not have been able to follow the standard protocol. I wish they would’ve, though. Who knows what would’ve happened if they did. Maybe nobody would’ve gotten hurt.”

“Sounds like another way the system failed you,” Sarah said as Janie put her head in her hands, and if I didn’t know Janie was lying, I would’ve believed her performance. She was good. Really good.

The parts about Allison were equally upsetting, but I forced myself to watch them too. At least Sarah wasn’t afraid to go there with Janie. She asked her about it point blank.

“Do you really think I wanted to murder Allison?” Janie’s eyes flared with anger. “That I had any idea when I shoved her down those stairs that she’d die?” She shook her head, answering her own question. “Absolutely not. I was just furious because I was a severely traumatized six-year-old girl, and I thought she was the reason I was being taken away from the only safe home and people I’d ever known. Being ripped away from parents I loved.” Her eyes welled with tears as she talked, but her voice trembled with repressed anger. “So, yes, I was angry and incredibly hurt. And I had the coping skills of a little kid, so that’s what I used.”

“But it says here in chapter five, when you’re reviewing the therapy notes from your first treatment center, that you wanted to ‘kill her’ and you wanted to ‘slice her open like a deer, and gut her from her throat to her stomach.’ You go on to say that you would ‘use her intestines like jump rope.’”

Janie winced at her own words. “I was angry.”

I kept pausing it at that moment and staring at Janie’s face. I zoomed in on her eyes over and over again as if I could tunnel my way inside her and figure out what she was plotting. Because no matter what her book said or whatever therapeutic work she claimed to be doing, she was up to something. The fact that she’d come back here said everything.

And then there were the parts about Caleb. Those were soul crushing. He looked awful. I hadn't seen him in over a year, but his pockmarked face and droopy eyes told me he was using again. He'd been hooked on Percocet and Adderall since he was seventeen. Since then, he'd cycled in and out of treatment so many times I'd lost count. Once he made it to almost a year. But mostly his sobriety was measured in days and hours. Drugs had ravaged his body, and they were slowly taking his mind too. It would've broken Allison's heart to see him this way.

He wouldn't look at anyone while he spoke. Not Sarah. Not Janie. Not the camera. He just stared at the floor with his long hair falling forward, making it impossible to see his eyes no matter which way they tried to angle things.

At the pivotal moment, Sarah leaned forward and placed her hand gently on his knee. "And you were the one to find your mother that day, correct?" His body stiffened at her question as he nodded. "What was that like for you?"

What did she think it was like? He was nine years old and he found his mother in a pool of blood with a broken neck at the bottom of stairs. Her face was frozen in the fear she'd died in, staring up the flight of stairs to where Janie stood at the top for seven minutes and thirty-two seconds, waiting for her to die. Now she sat across from him like she expected him to forgive her.

He couldn't answer. Most of his responses were like that. Mumbled one- or two-word phrases. He clearly didn't want to talk about it and was probably only up there for the money.

I shifted my attention back to Piper and the present moment. "Watching Caleb was the hardest. I couldn't bring myself to listen to him describe the ways she'd tortured him. I moved past those clips." There were some disturbing images I just didn't want in my head. I'd already had enough.

"She's evil and sadistic." Piper took another sip of her beer.

"Not according to her book," I quipped in a fake-happy voice. She snort-laughed and set her beer on the table so she wouldn't spill it. "What? You don't believe her?"

"Are you serious right now?" She eyed me in dramatic disbelief. "I don't know what you remember, but Janie never liked me. Not from day one. And after how everything played out, I know why—she knew I'd see

through her. That I wouldn't buy her act because I wasn't blinded by any maternal or paternal longing for a child that clouds other people's judgment. Being purposefully childless is kind of a superpower when working with kids like Janie. I hope that's not insulting—sorry if it is—but people like her don't shine their light on people they can't play, and she knew I was one of those people. It's why she never wanted anything to do with me."

"So, you don't trust her either?"

She burst out laughing. "Are you kidding me? That one pretty much goes without saying." She gave me a funny look. "You know it was your husband who was smitten with her, not me, right? I was never Team Janie. I was always Team Reality."

This time I was the one to laugh, and it felt surprisingly good.

"Is he still that way about her?" she asked.

"Oh my god, yes, even though he pretends like he's not."

"I thought you guys split up."

"We did for a while, but there was no way we could afford a divorce or living in two separate houses, so we stayed together." I twirled my fingers around the edge of my glass and smiled at her. "Super romantic, I know."

Our marriage was one of convenience. Our life was forever marked in a before/after sequence. Life before Janie and life after. Sometimes I really missed the before days. The ones where we worked alternating shifts at Northfield Hospital—me as a nurse, him as an orthopedic surgeon. Coming home after my long ER night shifts to hot tea and foot rubs on the couch. Where home was our safe haven, away from the trauma of our patients' lives.

"No judgment here. I live alone and all my plants die." Piper motioned to the bartender to bring us another round. She gave a clipped nod to the street behind us. "How'd you know she was here?"

"She's posted videos on TikTok from the waiting room a bunch of times. Apparently, this is the office of one of her therapists, and the receptionist's desk is always in the background, so I screenshotted it and blew up the doctor's name. Earlier today, she went live and said she'd be posting from her session later, so I checked the time stamp, then raced over here to see if I could catch her. I just froze when I saw her, though. I couldn't say or do anything. It was like some weird posttraumatic response or something."



Piper couldn't hide her surprise that I'd tracked Janie down, but she'd never known me when I was in my right mind. I was a different person when I wasn't suffering from postpartum depression and sleep deprivation. "Did she post parts of her therapy session again?"

"Of course." I rolled my eyes. She'd used TikTok to build her following and support long before she released her book or even announced she was writing one. She'd started filming when she was seventeen. Her last six months in the system had been spent at a halfway house for transition-age youth, so it'd been easy to do, and she had thousands of followers almost immediately. She became an overnight sensation.

"Social media is the perfect place for her because it gives her a platform she wouldn't have any other way." Piper shook her head in disgust. We were the last generation to grow up without the internet in our home while we were kids, where we didn't stream our lives 24-7. The evolution of technology we'd seen play out over the last century was astounding. All I wanted to do was go back, because in that world, Janie never would've been able to find my son.

For a moment each of us was lost in our own thoughts, until Piper broke the silence again.

"You know, I've never stopped following her case," she said, and for the first time, I really saw her. Not just the wrinkles in her face, but the weight of them. "I mean from the moment they took her away from Allison's house until now. I've never taken my eyes off her. I'll be responsible for her forever. Ever since I found out that her mother called social services for help and I never showed up for the visit. I—"

I reached my hand out and put it on top of hers. "Stop it. You can't blame yourself. You just can't. We all did things we wished we would've done differently back then. You have to let yourself off the hook." Too bad I couldn't follow my own advice. Part of me would always blame myself for Allison's death. "Besides, we can't change any of that, and we need to worry about what's happening now. You've got to help me keep her from hurting Cole. I don't care what anyone says about her or how many doctors she gets to give raving reviews about her miraculous recovery. She's a sociopath, and people like her don't stop hurting people."

That was the thing. I'd had a psychotic break and tried to drown her. There was no doubt about that. The sleep deprivation. Hormones. Janie's

insanity. All of it. Crazy. I wasn't going to deny that. But the things Janie did to toy with me? That part was true. Still was.

The other part that was true, that I'd never told anyone—not Christopher, any of my therapists, or my psychiatrists—was that I wished I'd been successful when I tried to drown her in the bathtub. Even after I put the fractured pieces of my psyche back together again and my mind stabilized, I wished I'd killed her. I still wanted her gone.

Piper slowly slipped her hand out from underneath mine. “Oh, she's hurt plenty of other people.”

“What? Are you sure? You mean besides her first roommate, and the kids at New Horizons?” She'd gone into great detail about the things she'd done to them in her book. Part of me wondered if she took some sick pleasure in describing the ways she tortured them, but apparently, she hadn't hurt anyone since. Her redemption hinged on it.

Piper leaned in close like someone might be listening, even though there were only two other people in the bar and they were on the other side of the room. “Nobody has fact-checked any of her story or interviewed the people she names in the book, because if they had, then they might have a different opinion of Janie. Because guess what? I've been working my way through all of them, and I can tell you this—they paint a very different picture of Janie.”

“I knew it!” I slapped the table, nearly spilling our beers.

Piper nodded while she steadied the glasses. “It's some pretty disturbing stuff. All of them said the same thing”—she paused for dramatic effect, but not too long because I was hanging on her every word—“and that's that she was cunning, cruel, and manipulative. Her roommates were terrified of her. And here's the thing you don't know about institutionalized kids. They love their roommates. They grow very attached to them because they become almost like siblings. But Janie? She cycled through roommates in every placement center she was in, all the way up until the very end. That says something. It says something huge.”

“We should find the roommates. Talk to them.”

“I already talked to one, and that's why I'm telling you—she hurts people. And not just physically. She likes to drive them crazy. Apparently, her favorite thing to do is glue their eyes shut while they're sleeping. Can you imagine? Waking up in darkness and not being able to open your eyes? It's mind-numbingly terrifying. The first time it happened to one of her

roommates, it took staff hours to figure it out, and after they did, they shifted to determining what might've triggered Janie, made her mad enough to do that, you know? But as far as they could tell, it was nothing. She did it for fun. She got a kick out of it. There are similar incidents at other facilities.”

My insides chilled as she described the other ways Janie had tortured kids. I could still feel the ice-cold breath of the demon I thought possessed Janie. She wasn't a demon, but I hadn't imagined her black eyes. Psychopaths' eyes turned black. I'd never been a religious person—still wasn't—but at the time, I'd never encountered anyone like Janie or entertained the possibility that someone like her could exist. And in my fragile mental state, I'd created the only explanation that made sense—she was possessed.

That's when I crossed over the line between fantasy and reality. I heard voices—real, genuine voices outside my own head—talking to me, telling me to do things. That was delusional, and it wasn't normal. But Janie being evil? That was as real as it gets, and that's what terrified me. She was back, and she was coming for my baby.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## PIPER

I slid into the passenger seat and waved at Hannah as she walked down the street. Her arms were wrapped tight around her body like she was giving herself a hug. I'd offered her a ride to her car, but she said she wanted to walk. Seeing her had stirred up so many emotions. She was the last person I expected to run into today. Christopher, yes. I'd been half expecting him to show up in one of the places I'd been following Janie since I'd started doing it, but not Hannah.

She'd impressed me today, though. She'd been such a destroyed woman the last time I saw her. Ravaged by the experience, even months after she'd gotten out of the hospital and was stabilized. I'd never seen her so vibrant and alive. She was no longer living as a victim. She'd definitely taken her power back, and there was nothing I loved more than a woman who'd confidently stepped into her own power. I was just sorry it'd taken this to help her find it again.

I didn't know how to stop Janie from hurting Cole any more than she did. I didn't know how to stop her from hurting anyone, period. She was my first child sociopath. My first and only, because true psychopathy in a child is rare. But it dawned on me that I couldn't say that about her anymore. She was no longer a child sociopath—she was an adult one. Ten times scarier. Because for people like Janie, age didn't make them better. It only made them better at not getting caught.

Hannah never knew I'd interviewed Janie's grandmother, the one that raised her for the first two years of her life. She told me something was off with Janie since birth. That she never slept. Just lay there with her eyes wide open and staring, never crying or making a sound. Just awake. Nearly

twenty-two hours a day. That was before she'd ever been in the care of her mother. Ever been in the back closet.

I hadn't told Hannah everything today either. Not because I was being intentionally vague or secretive, but because I didn't want to screw this up. It was too important. The part about feeling responsible was real, and as much as I told people I'd worked through the guilt, I still felt like I'd failed the entire family. Not to mention the system. Janie's biological mother called social services multiple times for help with Janie, and I'd been the one assigned to follow up with a home visit. Except I didn't because her file never made it onto my desk. My assistant didn't think the case was a priority, so she hadn't passed it on to me, but that didn't matter. I still blamed myself. So did everybody else, and no matter how many other positive things I'd accomplished in my career, it was the stain tarnishing all of it.

That's why I had to get this right. It might be my only chance.

I pulled onto the street, but instead of heading home, I drove in the direction of Janie's apartment. It was only a matter of time before Hannah figured out where she lived too. Maybe she already had. I drove across town to the Village and straight to Magnolia Avenue. Nobody but the young and single lived down here. And not just any young and single. This side of the town was reserved for the young adults who were just playing house and pretending to be real adults—the ones whose parents still paid their tuition and their rent to attend the community college close by or make the commute to Ohio State just a short hour's drive away.

All of this wasn't cheap, and like any luxury lifestyle, the cost to live here was astronomical. Yet this was where Janie had gotten her first apartment. It was nicer than my condo and probably cost more. No doubt she'd gotten a steep advance for her book, but that still wouldn't explain how she'd gotten into one of these apartments. Even with the cash, she still would've had to fill out an application.

This wasn't government-funded housing. It wasn't any place they put county kids after they aged out of the system or got out of jail. Not even close. Anybody under twenty-four required a cosigner for these units. If the kids got out of hand or didn't pay their rent on time, management called their parents. Who signed for Janie? She wouldn't be able to get in a regular apartment by herself. Not with a 326 credit score. The only thing worse

than having bad credit was having none, and she was about as low as you could go.

She hadn't used any of the programs offered to her by the county. I'd triple-checked. So how'd she turn on her gas? Pay for her trash pickup? And what about her car? Did she just pay cash for the entire thing? There was no way. She drove a BMW. It was an almost fifty-thousand-dollar car, which would've eaten up most of her advance. She wasn't that stupid.

Even if she somehow managed to avoid having a cosigner for this place, there was no way she'd pass the required background check. Not that anything would be flagged on her adult record. That was the nice thing about juvenile records—they were sealed once you hit eighteen. But somewhere this nice also wanted a rental history and a credit history. Along with proof of employment. None of which she had, especially not when she just got out. But she'd stayed here since the night of her release.

Someone was helping her. They had to be. There was no other explanation.

I hadn't checked any of my messages while I was talking to Hannah, and there were three missed calls from my old supervisor, Ronald. We started our careers together working at the foster care center downtown when we were both fresh out of college. He hadn't left a voice message, but he'd left a text, and I quickly pulled it up because I'd been waiting for him to get back to me since yesterday. There were only two words:

**It's him.**

My heart sank. I hadn't wanted it to be true. I'd hoped it wasn't.

I'd asked him to pull all Janie's applications. The ones she'd used to get the apartment and lease the car. He hadn't had any luck getting access to those documents, but yesterday he said he might have a connection at the gas company. The one that serviced every apartment in the city.

**Can you send a pic?** I texted back.

I watched the three dots, anxiously tapping my fingers on the dashboard. A picture popped up—a PDF. I scrolled to the bottom of the page, to the part that required a signature. And there it was. In black and white, the scrawled signature: Christopher Bauer.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## HANNAH

I paced circles in the living room, anxiously waiting for Christopher to get back from picking up Cole from practice. We were talking to him about Janie as soon as they got home. Christopher promised he wouldn't bring it up on the car ride no matter what happened, even if Cole said something first. It was taking them forever.

I'd hoped to never have this talk with Cole. That somehow we'd miraculously get through his life without him ever finding out about Janie or what happened. It wasn't like I never worried about him finding out. I did. But for some reason, I pictured him as an adult when it happened. Not barely thirteen and in his last year of middle school.

Thankfully, he'd been away at a hockey tournament last night, so it'd given us a chance to get our thoughts straight and given me an unexpected opportunity to talk to Piper. I was more convinced than ever that we needed to keep Cole away from Janie. She made us sound like such villains in the book. There was no mention of the hundreds of hours we'd spent in therapy with her or how Christopher slept on her bedroom floor for months so she'd feel safe. We'd both taken family leave and stayed home for over a month, cocooned in our house with just the three of us, trying to bond as a family. We'd changed our entire home and our lives to accommodate her needs. And it hadn't just been us. Our extended family had welcomed her with open arms too. We'd thrown her an adoption birthday party, celebrating her officially belonging to us. None of those things were in her book, and those were exactly the things Cole needed to hear. Not her twisted tale.

I'd known this day would come. It wasn't like they could keep Janie incarcerated for the rest of her life. They'd barely been able to keep her there until she was eighteen. The prosecution fought hard to keep her under

supervision despite the horrific nature of her crimes because nobody wanted to believe a six-year-old was that evil. That a kid could be born so bad.

What would I do now that she was free in the world? I'd never let my thoughts travel down that path. I practiced extreme control over my thoughts. That was a big part of my treatment. Same as it'd been a big part of my problem—letting them get away from me. It's a slippery slope down into the pit of hell, which was exactly where they'd taken me. I'd barely gotten out. So, I kept careful watch over my thoughts.

“We'll fix them one at a time.” That's what my therapist said when we started working together in the psychiatric hospital after I'd nearly killed Cole instead of Janie when I slipped trying to drown her.

And we did. Thought by thought, and piece by piece, she'd painstakingly put my destroyed mind back together. There were two-hour-long sessions where all I did was cry and nothing else. Allison and I were only eleven months apart, so we were more like twins than sisters, and the grief was almost unbearable. The fact that I was responsible for her death only added to the pain. If it hadn't been for Cole, I probably would've given up, but I'd crawled my way out of that dark hole to be his mother.

For the thousandth time, I wished we could just flee this place and start over somewhere else far away, but we were glued to this town. There was nowhere in the country that would hire Christopher with a record of child endangerment and parental neglect or pay anywhere close to the salary we needed to stay afloat. To keep ourselves out of bankruptcy, the creditors off our backs, and avoid foreclosing on the house. Lawyers had sucked our accounts dry faster than we could fill them, and our finances would never recover from the hit. Not to mention paying for three years of Janie's residential care out of pocket. If his supervisor at Northfield hadn't been his oldest and closest friend, he would've lost his job and we would've lost everything.

Christopher's car pulled up the driveway, and I raced back to the living room, quickly sitting on the couch and trying to act normal. Cole walked in first and immediately knew something was up. He eyed me like a stranger he was meeting for the first time, and I wanted to weep at the pain staring back at me. He was the mirror image of Christopher—tall and lanky, with sandy-blond hair he was constantly brushing out of his eyes because, unlike his dad, he insisted on wearing it long. His hockey bag was slung over his shoulder. He smelled like the rink.



“We never wanted to hurt you,” I blurted out. I couldn’t help myself. I had to fix this. “We never wanted to keep secrets from you or lie to you, Cole. We were just trying to protect you. We love you.”

“My entire life has been a lie,” he snapped at me. Christopher put his hand on his back to warn him about his tone, but Cole jerked away and glared up at him instead. “You’re just as bad as she is.” He spit the words out.

“Look, son, I don’t know what Janie told you about what happened or how you’re feeling, but your mom and I would really like the opportunity to talk to you about all of it. Give you a chance to hear our side of the story. You can ask us any questions you like. I promise we’ll be honest.” Christopher kept his voice calm and steady; always the voice of reason and logic, even in a crisis. It was why he was such a good surgeon.

“Oh, you’re going to be honest with me now?” He snorted.

“We never lied to you, Cole. We haven’t lied to you once,” I cried.

He whipped around to face me. “Seriously? You never told me I even had a sister. You kept me away from her my entire life.” His face was twisted in pain and grief. My insides squeezed. It was worse than I’d imagined. He had the same lovestruck, starry-eyed look Christopher used to have when he talked about Janie.

I stood and walked slowly toward him like he was an animal I didn’t want to spook. I chose my words carefully. “Cole, honey, she’s not your sister. I wasn’t even pregnant with you when we brought her home from the hospital, and you only lived together for a couple months when you were an infant. There’s no way you even remember her.”

“Yes, I do! That’s not true,” he yelled. His fists clenched at his sides. “I’ve always remembered her. Not like a person, really. More like a feeling of somebody. And she’s that feeling. She’s the part of me that was missing.”

My eyes darted to Christopher. Was this really happening? Cole had never been anything but well adjusted and happy. He was one of the most easygoing kids I knew. He certainly never acted like he was some sad, lonely child, wandering around missing his sister.

“That must’ve been really hard,” Christopher said, trying to be empathetic while my brain spun backward for signs I’d missed. How long had their relationship been going on? We had to get him away from her before she did any more damage.

“My whole life I wanted a brother or a sister. My whole life. I never said anything to you guys about it because I didn’t want you to feel bad, and you were always trying *so hard to be okay with having an only child*.” He said the last part with a mocking tone I’d never heard in his voice before. Not once. He’d never even been all that mad at me. I had no idea how to handle it. “Do you know how lonely it is without siblings? And then I find out I’ve had a sister this entire time? My whole life I’ve had a sister, and you’ve kept her a secret from me.” His voice wavered with emotion. Tears filled his eyes. I hadn’t seen him cry in years.

I took another tentative step toward him. I fought the urge to grab him and pull him into my arms for a tight hug because I didn’t want him to bolt upstairs. “The only reason we didn’t tell you about her was because she was never going to be in your life. Never. So there was no reason. And besides that, Cole, we knew she was dangerous and that she’d always be dangerous. We couldn’t risk her hurting you in some way. We were trying to keep you safe.”

“Hurting me?” Rage filled his face. Lips tight with fury. “She’s the only one who understands me.”

What had she done? What had she said? This was so much more than morbid curiosity or something to do because he was bored. This had changed his entire narrative. I could see it in his eyes. The way he looked at both of us differently. He’d never had an ounce of mistrust in us, but there it was, written all over his face. She’d completely brainwashed him.

I took both his hands in mine. “Listen, sweetie, I know this is really hard stuff, and all of it must be so confusing for you. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through, but please, you have to understand, we weren’t trying to hurt you or lie to you. We just wanted to protect our family. We—”

He jerked his hands out of my hold. “She is our family.”

Christopher stepped forward. “She’s not our family, Cole. Not anymore.” I could see the realization slowly happening on Christopher’s face. The moment. I’d been waiting on it for over a decade. Thinking about Janie being in his son’s life scared him, and there was no reason to be scared of people that weren’t dangerous. “There are lots of things in our past lives that we don’t tell you about. Parents don’t tell their kids every piece of their history. That’d be impossible. Not to mention totally inappropriate.”

“Well, you left out a pretty important piece.” He glared at Christopher.

I felt him slipping away from us and scrambled for the words to help him understand what it'd been like. Why we'd done what we did. "We really wanted Janie to be a part of our family. Really, we did. We fell in love with her at the hospital, and all we wanted was to give her a safe, loving home so she could heal. We knew she'd have problems. We did. We weren't naive. And, honey, when we brought Janie home from the hospital, we didn't think we could have other children. How many times have I told you that you were our miracle baby?" Our fertility specialists had assured us I couldn't get pregnant. I'd told him the story so many times. How utterly shocked we'd been to discover I was pregnant. All of it had been true. We'd just neglected to tell him Janie had come before all that and what happened afterward. "It's one of the reasons we did what we did, because we didn't think we'd have other children, and Cole, if we knew you were coming, honestly, we probably wouldn't have done it. I don't know what Janie's told you, but she tried to hurt you when you were a baby. I bet you didn't know that, did you?"

But my words didn't penetrate him. None of that mattered to him.

"I had a sister, and you kept her away from me." He folded his arms on his chest.

I'd never imagined anything like this. Never considered the possibility, but now here it was, standing in front of me, trembling, and I didn't know what to do or how to stop it. The powerlessness over the situation made me dizzy.

"I understand how hard and confusing this must be for you. Please, just give us an opportunity to sit down and tell you what happened." Christopher put his hand on Cole's forearm as if to guide him into the living room with me, and Cole flung him off.

"I already know what happened."

Christopher took a deep breath. Tried again. "Yes, but we'd like to tell you what it was like for us."

"What it was like?" He turned around, and stepped closer to Christopher. His chin to his chest, practically as tall as him now. "I don't know, Dad, why don't you tell me what it was like to adopt a little girl and then give her back to the state to raise when she had problems? She—"

"That's not how it happened!" I shouted, then quickly felt bad. "Sorry, I didn't mean to yell, but that's not how it went down, Cole."

“It’s not? You didn’t adopt my sister and then unadopt her?” He shifted his gaze back and forth between me and Christopher, daring one of us to speak.

“First off, your sister tried to hurt you, and then she killed my sister and wasn’t even sorry. So yes, I didn’t feel like raising her anymore.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“Do you know what they did to her in those places, Mom?” His face switched from anger to sadness in an instant. “They did horrible things to her. Horrible things. She was raped. More than once. I bet you didn’t know that, did you?” His voice wavered like he was going to cry again. “And you put her there, Mom. You left her there.” He pointed his finger at me. “You did that.”

My mouth fell open. Who was this person? He was looking at me like he hated me. These weren’t his thoughts. She’d given them to him. Planted them in his head. I reached for him, but he stepped back. He didn’t want me to touch him. He just shook his head in disgust at me, and my heart shattered.

“It wasn’t just your mom’s decision,” Christopher said, quickly coming to my defense even though it really had been. He probably would’ve stayed with Janie until the end. “We did what we thought was best at the time, and the best thing for our family was to heal. For your mom to get better, and for you to get better too. You were in the hospital with them.”

“Yes, you conveniently forgot to tell me about that, too, but don’t worry—Janie filled me in. That information might’ve helped explain why I have such a hard time in school, you know.” He shrugged. “Head injury when I was a baby and all.” He stepped around us and headed toward the stairs. “You can’t keep me away from her. She’s my sister.”

“Cole, we don’t want you to have any more contact with Janie,” Christopher yelled at him as he walked away.

He flung a backward glance over his shoulder at us. “Then I guess you’re going to have to find a way to stop me.” He whipped around and stormed upstairs before we could respond. He slammed his bedroom door behind him. The sound reverberated throughout the house.

My insides recoiled. Oh my god. The monster had gotten to my son. What had she done to my baby?

# CHAPTER SIX

## PIPER

I hurried down the sidewalk and into the restaurant. My last home visit had run late, so I was even later to meet Christopher. He'd been here for twenty minutes and had already grabbed us a seat in the corner. He waved and smiled when he saw me, motioning me over.

We'd gone out for coffee once a few years back. It was during one of the times that he and Hannah were separated. I tried to pretend like I didn't know that, but I did. I knew he was dating. I'd seen him on the apps. There were only so many of us in our age range in the area. It was awkward and weird from the moment we sat down, and we'd never done it again.

"Thanks for meeting me on such short notice," I said, sliding into my seat.

"No problem. I don't have a lot of time, but I managed to rearrange some things." He was still in his scrubs. Probably heading to surgery once we were finished.

"I wanted to talk to you about Janie," I said, like there was any other thing we had in common to meet about. I opened my briefcase and pulled out the folder holding all the paperwork. I'd called in every favor I had to get these. "I know what you're doing, and I just wanted to come here today to give you an opportunity to tell Hannah first."

He balked. "What are you talking about?"

"Helping Janie."

He shook his head and looked confused. "I'm not helping Janie with anything."

"Christopher, please. You don't have to do this. You don't need to lie to me. I know what's been going on, and I'm not going to keep it from Hannah." I opened the folder and laid my hands on top of it. I wasn't

messing around. I couldn't hide something this terrible. I wouldn't let him do this behind Hannah's back. "You need to tell her. She deserves to have all the information so she can make an informed decision about what she wants to do."

"Informed decision about what? You're not making any sense." He looked irritated, and he'd never been irritated with me before. I'd hit a nerve. Liars never liked getting caught. Nothing made them angrier.

"Please just stop." I laid it out in front of me like I was laying down my hand at the blackjack table. "You see these, Christopher? This is Janie's rental application, her lease application, her gas, *and* her electric. You know what happens when you're eighteen years old and you've been incarcerated since you were seven? It's tough to get much on your own. Most of our transition-age youth really struggle. It's why lots of them end up back on the streets or in prison. But not Janie. No, Janie's doing really well." I cocked my head to the side. "The only reason she's doing so well, as you know, is because she's had someone helping her." I slid the applications across the table at him. "And that someone is you."

He wrinkled his forehead like he was even more confused. I pushed the papers closer to him. "You signed for everything for her." I pointed to the one on top—the power company application. "That's your social security number right there, and your birthday underneath it. And down here?" I flipped to the next page. "That's your signature on the dotted line."

"What are you talking about?" He reached over like it finally dawned on him what I was accusing him of. He snatched up the papers, and quickly started going through them over and over again. Grabbing one, then slapping it down, and going on to the other. He shook his head harder and harder the longer he went along. "No. No, I didn't do this. It wasn't me. I didn't do it. I never signed these. Some of these are electronic."

"Come on, Christopher. Don't lie to me. That's why we're here today, because I want to give you the opportunity to stop lying and a chance to tell Hannah what you're doing before I do." I narrowed my eyes. I'd never been so mad at him. I could only imagine how Hannah was going to feel. This might be the actual end. I'd let her move in with me if she needed to.

"I'm not lying to you, Piper. I've never seen this paperwork." His forehead dotted with sweat. He loosened his shirt. "I've never signed any document relating to Janie. Ever. This isn't my signature. It doesn't even

look the same. Somebody did this online or something. Come on.” He shoved the papers back at me.

I put my hands up, refusing to take them. “Please, Christopher, some of these are digital signatures, but there are also original hard copies, and that’s your social security number right there too.” I pointed at the papers again, in case he forgot. “I know you think you’re helping her, but you’re not. You’re just providing a way for her to stay sick.”

“Piper, I’m not doing anything. I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He tucked his chin. His jaw set in a straight line.

“Do you want to know where her last roommate is, Christopher? The one she had at Bridges? She’s in a group home with people three times her age. She’ll have services for the rest of her life.” I’d lose my job for telling him all this, but I didn’t care. I’d crossed over so many lines at this point, it didn’t matter. “She’s nineteen years old, and she’s in an assisted care facility because Janie drove her out of her mind. I went to see her, and if you think Janie did a number on your wife’s mental health, you should’ve seen the way she ravaged hers. She’s terrified. Literally terrified to go to sleep because that last time she went to sleep, she woke up in darkness and couldn’t open her eyes. She—”

He interrupted me. “Why couldn’t she open her eyes?”

“Oh, you haven’t heard about Janie’s favorite thing to do?” I’d assumed Hannah told him about our conversation, but I guess not. “Janie likes to glue her roommates’ eyelids shut. She started doing it at New Horizons, and did it all the way up until this last one. It was almost impossible to stop her because she did it at night and you never knew when she was going to strike. Sometimes they caught her. Sometimes they didn’t. Her latest roommate lost it. Thankfully, staff knew about Janie’s history, so they knew what to do, but Janie used superglue that time.” His eyes widened, and horror filled his face. I’d had the same reaction when I found out. It was an awful thing to do to a person. “They couldn’t get it off the poor girl without tearing apart her eyelids. So, they had to wait, and it took almost three days for the skin cells to slough off and the glue to loosen its hold. In the meantime, she was in total darkness, and it was pretty awful for her. Once they finally got her eyes open, she didn’t sleep for seven days because she was so terrified of it happening again. She still battles terrible PTSD and insomnia. I went to see her, and I’ve never seen anything like that.”

I shuddered at the memory.

She'd cowered in the corner of her bed with her legs hugged up against her chest. Staff said that's how she spent most of her time. She rarely left her room outside of scheduled activities. Officially diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic with psychotic features.

"Hi," I'd said, tentatively approaching her bed. "My name is Piper. Thanks for agreeing to meet with me today." She flattened herself even farther against the wall, refusing to look at me. She squeezed herself tightly. There were bandages on both forearms. She'd become a chronic self-harmer. She still wore hospital clothes, which meant she hadn't graduated to regular street clothes yet. Never a good sign. "Do you mind if I sit?" I patted the end of the bed.

She didn't answer. Not that question or the one I asked next. I still tried to interview her, but most of what she said didn't make sense.

"There's snakes in the wall. You hear them? Shush. Shush. Baby no baby. You don't ever want to do that. You see how she did? Snakes. But not any of the rats. They're gone." All of her talking was like that—tangential, disconnected, and paranoid.

I asked her about Janie just once. She became extremely agitated and started pulling the bandages off her arms, digging into her skin. Her eyes darted around the room like Janie might walk into the door at any second. I backed off immediately and didn't try again. No matter how confused and paranoid she might've been, there was no mistaking she was terrified of Janie. I spoke with her therapist before I left, and she confirmed it.

"It's so sad," she said, shaking her head. "Whatever that girl did to her, she messed her up for life. Most people are scared of people that aren't there. Or voices. Faces. Demons. The government implanting devices. But Marsha's scared of someone real. Her delusions are rooted in Janie, an actual person who's attached to an actual traumatic event. It makes her very difficult to treat."

I came back to the present moment, and shifted my focus to Christopher. He rubbed his forehead while he stared at the paperwork scattered in front of us on the table. "I understand how dangerous she is, Piper," he said after a few more seconds had passed. "Last night we confronted Cole about talking with Janie, and I don't know, it really scared me . . . he's so angry with us. She's filled his head full of so many lies. Made it sound like we sent her off to some horrible institution to be



abused.” He hesitated, taking a moment to compose himself before going on. “Said she was raped multiple times. Was she really hurt there?” He raised his head, his eyes desperately pleading with mine to say it wasn’t so. “Is she telling the truth about that?”

“Don’t fall for her lies, Christopher.” It was hard to keep my voice down. “Believe me, plenty of kids get hurt in institutions. I’m not saying that doesn’t happen. It does. All the time. Some of the places and programs where they’re sent are worse than the homes we’re taking them away from. That’s legit. Government-funded placements are largely understaffed, and most of the employees are high school graduates with absolutely no training. So, it’s easy for kids to fall through the cracks and get hurt. That part is true.” I leaned even closer to him. “But here’s the deal about Janie—she was the one hurting other kids. Not the other way around. I’ve looked into every single placement she was at, and there’s not a single incident of abuse reported by her, but there are plenty of reports made against her. Most of the incidents were at night when people were at their most vulnerable and couldn’t defend themselves.”

“Cole believes her. Everything she says. I don’t know what to do.” His shoulders sagged in defeat. He slowly gathered all the papers he’d shoved at me. He laid the gas and power bills next to each other, studying them closely before taking out his phone. His fingers flew on the screen while he searched for something. He slowed when he found it. He blew it up and laid the phone down next to the gas application. “See? This clearly isn’t me.”

I peered down. It was a PDF of last year’s tax returns with his signature at the bottom. I examined the documents he’d spread out. All required actual signatures. The scrawls couldn’t have been more different. There was no mistaking it wasn’t his signature. I slowly lifted my head. “Well, if you aren’t helping her, then who is?”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## HANNAH

“**Y**ou sure he’s in the shower?” Christopher whispered like Cole might still hear us, even though he was upstairs with the water running and his music blaring.

“Yes. What’s going on?” He’d texted from work that he was coming home early and there was something important he needed to talk about. He’d been acting funny ever since he got here.

I stared at him, sitting across from me at the kitchen table. We’d had so many discussions right here over the years. In the exact same chairs, because of the unwritten household rule that once you picked a spot, it was yours forever. Somehow, despite everything we’d been through, we were still together. I’d tried to drown a little girl in a bathtub. He’d hit me when I said she deserved to die. And now this? In a way, we were destined to be together. Trauma-bonded for life.

“Okay, I had coffee with Piper today, and there’s been some new developments.” He folded his hands in front of him. He wore his most serious face. All business. “Janie doesn’t live in government housing like most kids getting out of the system. She lives in a super bougie apartment on Magnolia Avenue across town. Ones where anyone under the age of twenty-four has to get a cosigner, and Piper found all the paperwork for her apartment, listing me as the cosigner. Janie’s got my name on all her other applications too. Basically, all her household and utilities stuff—gas, water, electric, cable. I’m on all of it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, you want to see?” Christopher pulled out a stack of paperwork from his bag, and handed it to me. I quickly thumbed through it.

“This isn’t your signature,” I said before I’d even gotten through a couple of pages. “I can’t believe she forged your signature on all this.”

He shook his head. “She wasn’t the one who forged my signature.”

“What do you mean? How do you know?”

“Because it’s not just about my signature. She couldn’t fill out any of these applications without my social security number and other personal information. She definitely didn’t have access to any of that. And she even went so far as to use my insurance on her lease, so somebody had to give her that.”

“Her lease?” I raised my eyebrows.

“For her BMW,” he said, looking embarrassed, but I didn’t know what he had to be embarrassed about. It’s not like he’d actually leased her BMW. “I feel like such an idiot because it’s all been happening right underneath my nose for months and I never noticed. I’m usually so careful with all our finances, you know that, but it’s been so busy at work lately, so I let them slide. I was going to get caught up with everything at the end of the month. I should’ve looked. We could’ve stopped this sooner.”

“What are you saying? That we’ve been paying for all of her bills? Her rent?”

He nodded slowly like he wished it wasn’t true.

White-hot fury shot through me. “She doesn’t even need the money! She can afford to pay for everything herself. She’s just doing it to fuck with us.”

“I know,” he said softly. And for the first time in all these years, he saw Janie. He actually saw her for who and what she really was. The scales gone from his eyes. The denial stripped away. All these years I’d waited for this, but it didn’t feel like I’d always thought it would. It just made me more terrified of her and incredibly sad. I sank into my chair. “But that’s not all.” He let out a slow deep breath. “It’s Cole.”

“What do you mean, it’s Cole?” I asked the question, but I didn’t know if I actually wanted the answer. Part of me wanted to cover my ears so I didn’t have to hear what he said next.

Christopher reached across the table and took my hand, rubbing his thumb on the top of my skin. He spoke softly, trying to ease the pain of whatever he was about to tell me. “He’s the one helping her. He gave her my social security number and forged all the signatures. He arranged for all the payments and set everything up.”

I slammed my chair back from the table and jumped up. “No. No. No. Not Cole.” I shook my head in quick, jerky movements. “He doesn’t have anything to do with this. No, he doesn’t. He can’t. They’re just talking. That’s all.”

We’d gone through his phone after the interview. Seen all their texts. Cole had even shown Christopher the Instagram account he wasn’t supposed to have, where she’d initially reached out to him.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. He’s helping her do all of it and get her the information she needs.”

I just kept shaking my head, and he just kept talking. He wouldn’t shut up.

“After Piper gave me the paperwork, I canceled the rest of my surgeries and spent all afternoon figuring it out. I went through his phone again, just to make sure there wasn’t anything we missed, but there was nothing. That didn’t matter, though. I knew they were in on it together. They had to be. All of it was too elaborate. So, I logged in to his computer remotely, and that’s when I found their Discord chat. It’s hidden in a secret folder. Everything’s there. They message and video chat constantly. Almost every day. Cole’s completely wrapped up in her. I don’t even know if he sees her as a sister or has a massive crush on her. I don’t think he knows either. You should see how she talks to him, Hannah. She’s so manipulative, and he just eats it right up because he’s so young. I can pull it all up if you want to see it.”

“No, I don’t need to see it. I trust you.” I shook my head slowly. Still throttled by the information. “I just can’t believe all this was happening and we had no idea. Or was he that good of a liar?” And if he was, what did that mean? I wasn’t sure which proposition was scarier. They all made me feel sick. I leaned against the wall to steady myself.

Christopher broke into the silence. “It gets worse, Hannah.” His eyes were as vulnerable as the day he asked me to marry him, and I had to sit back down. He worked his jaw while he spoke. “I really hate telling you all this . . .” He took a quivering breath. “I’m not sure how he’s been able to act like everything is okay these past few months, because she’s turned him against us. Like, really turned him against us, through all these subtle mind-control tricks.” He rubbed his temples like this was giving him a throbbing headache. “She tells him constantly that he can’t trust us. That you always hated her and never wanted to adopt her but I talked you into it. How you

locked her up in her room and didn't feed her when I was at work." He swallowed hard because that last part was partially true. I'd been so afraid of Janie hurting Cole or me while Christopher was at work, I had locked her up in her room to keep us safe. It was the only way I felt like I could contain her at the time. "But the worst thing she does is tell him you sent her a card while she was in the hospital and said you were glad she was raped. She sent him a picture of the card with your writing on the inside. I have no idea how she did it, but she created a pretty brilliant match to your handwriting. She presented it to him like she'd kept it all these years."

I brought my hand up to my mouth. "He doesn't believe her, does he?"

"It sounds like he does."

"How could he possibly believe all those things and act like everything was okay when he was with us? If I thought one of my parents had done something like that, I wouldn't be able to even be in the same room." My head spun, trying to connect the dots. Nothing had seemed amiss with him. Absolutely nothing. He'd been his usual self. He still hugged me on his way to bed every night. It physically hurt to imagine him believing I'd do something so awful.

Christopher got up and came around to my side of the table. He stood next to me and gently placed his hand on my shoulder. "I've been asking myself the same questions all afternoon. He's young and impressionable, and honestly, if you'd seen the way she is—so subtle with everything in the beginning—it's easy to see how it happened. It's like she whittled her way into his thoughts without him knowing. There were a few times where I found myself second-guessing my own damn self. That's how good she is." He ran his hands through his hair, then dropped to his knees, crouching next to me. "We've got to do something. I don't know what that something is, but we've got to figure it out quick. We can't wait." I didn't miss the urgency in his voice or the implication that it was only going to get worse. He was holding on to something else. My stomach dropped.

"Christopher, what is it? Tell me." I put my hands on his cheeks.

He lifted his head, his voice barely a whisper. "They're planning on running away together."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## PIPER

If Janie was startled to see me when she walked into her social worker's office, she hid it well. I'd begged my way into this meeting and had to pull the previous-supervisor card with her new social worker, Hank.

"Hi, Piper," she said without missing a beat.

"Hello, Janie," I said. "I wanted to—"

"Hope," she interrupted me. "I'm Hope." How could she say that with a straight face? But she was. Looking right into my eyes as she did. "You're not supposed to be here," she said. Her eyes flashed with anger, but before I could respond, she jerked her gaze from mine and focused it on Hank. "I told you she might do something like this."

He shrugged and looked sheepish. What was she talking about? He'd never said anything about her mentioning me when we spoke last night. I tried to grab his attention, but he was still staring at her like they were a team and I was the one on the outside. That's not how this was supposed to happen. Was that why he'd been acting so uncomfortable since I got here? Something passed unspoken between them, and then suddenly, he turned to me.

"She's right, Piper, you shouldn't be here, and I already told you this makes me really uncomfortable. I made a mistake. This was a bad idea." He rose from his desk and pointed at the door. "I'm sorry."

Janie flew across the room to stand next to him in solidarity and crossed her arms on her chest. "I've already filed a claim with Instagram to take down *AlleyesonJanie*, and if you don't stop following me, I'm going to file a restraining order next."

Hank stood beside her. His hands on his hips. His face as serious as hers.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I tried to keep my voice calm and my face neutral as I turned to Hank. I didn’t want to act defensive, so I looked guilty even though I hadn’t done anything wrong. “I’ve never seen an Instagram account on Janie, and it certainly isn’t mine. I only have a personal account and that’s it. Oh, and I’m definitely not stalking her.”

He didn’t believe me. It was written all over his face. Why’d he let me come here? Had he told her I was coming? Was that why she wasn’t surprised? Janie dug in her pocket and pulled out her phone. She swiped through it quickly, then handed it to me.

“This isn’t you?” She waved the phone in my face.

I refused to take it. I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of looking at whatever fake profile she’d created.

Hank’s eyes filled with concern as he watched me. “I didn’t believe her at first, when she brought it to my attention a few weeks ago. But then, when you called last night and were so adamant about confronting her, and going on and on about how you’d been following her, well . . .” He shrugged, his voice trailing off.

What had she done? She stared at me with a half smirk on her face. This was a game, and she was waiting for me to make my next move, but I wasn’t playing. Not with her.

I stood and pushed my chair in. I kept my focus on Hank, refusing to give her my attention or my reaction. “I think you’re right. I’m going to go now and let you handle this.”

I didn’t wait for either of them to respond as I hurried out of the room. I held back the urge to sprint to the elevator and tried to calm down, but my heart was pounding. As soon as the doors shut behind me, I whipped out my phone and pulled up Instagram. I found *AlleyesonJanie* almost immediately.

The page looked as legit as any other catfisher account. She used my picture from the Women’s March for my profile so I looked like an activist. Pulled all the best photos from my real Instagram account, even downloaded old Facebook photos. And then I spotted the picture I’d supposedly posted a week ago.

Everything stilled. The last photo was an elaborate collage taking up the entire wall of the closet in my guest bedroom. It was covered in newspaper clippings, timelines, court transcripts, and photos from her case. All of it arranged like an elaborate map, with arrows drawn in black Sharpie

connecting all the pieces. It was a disturbing arrangement. I wasn't going to lie. It made me look a bit obsessed, and maybe I was, but that wasn't the problem. I'd never posted the photo anywhere. I'd never even shown anyone the wall. Nobody had seen it but me, because obviously, I knew how it looked. That only meant one thing—she'd been in my house.



# CHAPTER NINE

## HANNAH

I flattened myself against the brick wall next to the trash cans, not moving a muscle. Listening so hard, my ears rang. The alleyway behind Bayside Counseling was eerily quiet. Nobody around. That was good. My heart banged in my chest.

I'd been teetering on the edge of this, but my mind was made up as soon as Piper told me what happened with Janie this morning. If she was that conniving with Piper, what were her plans with Cole? I'll do anything to protect him. Anything.

I'd messaged Janie on their Discord, pretending to be Cole, and asked her to meet me here after her session tonight. It's where she'd been begging him to meet her for weeks. Said they could meet at the dumpster behind the bakery and sneak back to her place without anyone seeing them. Any lingering doubts about this disappeared the moment she agreed to meet my thirteen-year-old son in person. I've never been so sure of a decision in my life. She'd hated Cole and was only using him to get to us. That's what I screamed at him in the middle of the fight last night, but nothing we said made a dent in his delusions any more than it had the first time. He defended her with righteous indignation when we confronted him about their relationship.

I gripped the knife in my hand. Palms slick with sweat. Could I do this? Could I really do this? Panic inched up my stomach and settled in my throat. I fought the urge to run.

*Just stab her, Hannah,* I silently instructed myself. *Don't think.* Deep breaths in and out, like I'd practiced in therapy. But it didn't help. Then suddenly, without warning, it was happening.

The door opened. My body flooded with adrenaline. She was there.

Right there.

In front of me, holding a notebook, looking fresh and clean, like therapy had given her a purifying shower.

“Hannah?” Shock first; then a smile spread wide across her face like she was happy to see me, almost as if she’d been expecting me. “What are you doing here?”

I froze. Just like I’d done before when I saw her. But this was nothing like then.

She tilted her head teasingly to the side. A playful smile in her eyes. I’d never forgotten that look. She’d been waiting for this. It was exactly what she wanted. She took a step toward me. She loved toying with me. Always had.

“I’m assuming you’re here to talk about Cole?” The smile hadn’t left her face. So pleased to have gotten to me as I trembled in front of her. Except that wasn’t why I was shaking. Not this time.

His name in her mouth was all I needed to move forward. I clutched the knife against my side. Smiled back at her with the same devilish expression she was giving me.

And then I stabbed her. Right in the guts.

Just like that. Straight above her belly button. Her ribs broke under my hand. She let out a squeak. Her mouth opened in a small circle of surprise. Eyes wide. Total shock. This wasn’t part of her plan, but she’d underestimated me. I pushed the knife past the bone to where it slid in smooth.

Ohmigod.

I did it! I really did it.

I dropped the knife like it’d burn me and jumped back. But the knife didn’t fall. It stayed stuck inside Janie. She clutched it with both hands, staggering backward like she was drunk. The blood spilled out of her, covering her fingers. She stared at her hands clasped on the knife, and a wicked grin slowly covered her face. Pain—even her own—excited her.

I should’ve run.

That’s what you did when you stabbed someone. You didn’t stand there watching them die unless you were Janie. Seven minutes and thirty-two seconds. That’s how long she stood at the top of the stairs while Allison struggled to stay alive. It’d never been about Janie shoving her down the

stairs. That could've been an accident. It was about her watching Allison die and doing nothing to save her.

Now I watched her in the same way. Allison had bled from her head, but Janie bled from her stomach. Just like the deer she'd said she wanted to butcher. The blood spread, staining her shirt and the front of her pants. It looked like she'd peed them in blood. She kept gasping for air like a fish coming up to the surface to breathe, and all I could do was stare at her while she struggled.

She crumpled to her knees, still holding the knife with both hands. "Hannah . . . please . . .," she begged. Blood gurgled in her throat. It leaked out of the corners of her mouth along with the primal fear bulging her eyes.

I had no words. My hands shook as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I wasn't ready to call 911, though. It wasn't time. Not yet. I had to make sure Janie was dead. I wasn't going anywhere or calling anyone until there was no chance of her being revived. How long could she hold on? I wished she would hurry. I furtively scanned the alley, left, then right, and back again. Someone was going to come any second. What would I do then? A pool of red spread underneath her, inching its way to my feet. I had to get out of here.

Should I stab her again?

I crouched beside her. Her face was shocked and white. Eyes pools of darkness. Short, jerky breaths. I turned her head to the side so I wouldn't have to look at her. There was so much blood. Could I pull the knife out and do it again? The thought made me dizzy and nauseous. I'd only planned on having to stab her once. I hadn't thought this part through. What if I couldn't do it again? The world spun. Tilted.

Suddenly, there was movement. Heavy footsteps behind me. I sprang to my feet and stood in front of Janie's body, trying to hide as much of her as possible. Panic shot through me, squeezed the air from my lungs. What did I say? What did I do? My thoughts raced in circles.

Their shadow moved closer, and then, just like that, they were in plain view. I squinted. Piper? Was that Piper? Relief buckled my knees at the sight of her. She pushed me aside and crouched next to Janie, just like I'd been moments before.

"What are you doing here?" I asked breathlessly, scanning everywhere to see if anyone had followed her. Was Christopher with her? The police?

But she paid me no attention. She watched Janie writhe on the ground. She was gagging and gasping now, clawing at her throat. Growing weaker by the second. It was almost over. We were so close.

“I had to do it, Piper. I had to. You don’t understand. I couldn’t let them run away together. At least that’s what he thinks they’re doing. I don’t know what she was going to do to him, though. What she’s been planning. Think about all the years she had to plot this, Piper. What if she killed him? Or tortured him? I couldn’t just stand by and let her hurt my son. I couldn’t take the chance. I just couldn’t.” I talked fast, repeating myself. “I know you don’t have kids, so you can’t understand, but you’ll do anything to save them. Absolutely anything. Even if it means sacrificing your own life. He —”

She grabbed my forearm and squeezed hard to stop me. “I understand completely.”

And then it registered.

She wasn’t calling 911 either. She wasn’t pulling the knife out of Janie’s flesh or trying to do anything to save her. She was just standing next to me. Her words hung in the air. The moment stretched out between us. Janie’s breath grew shallow and noisy, but she was hanging on, and if she kept doing that, it was only a matter of time before someone else stumbled upon us the same way she had.

“You should get out of here before anyone comes,” I said, putting my arm around Piper’s shoulders. It was oddly comforting having her with me, but it was time for her to leave. “You don’t need to be any part of this.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“It’s fine, Piper. You don’t have to go down for this. It’s my problem, and I took care of it. I don’t want you to get in any trouble, and you will if you stay. They’ll know you were here.” My heartbeat had started to slow even though Janie was still breathing. I was resigned to my fate, especially now that it was almost over. “I’m going to wait until I know for sure that she’s dead. Then I’ll call 911, so nobody innocent accidentally finds her, like a kid or something. I’ll wait till I hear them coming, then I’ll bolt.”

“That’s a terrible plan. There’s no way you get away with this.”

I shook my head. “I’m not planning on getting away with this. I’m going to jail for sure.” That was the hardest part of the plan, but I meant what I said to Piper—you’ll do anything for your kids, including go to prison. “I tried to make it look like I had a psychotic break again, and I’m

hoping that will make them give me a lighter sentence. I created an entire journal and backdated everything. Made it look like I totally derailed, just like before. I'll still have to go to jail, but hopefully, they'll give me less time because of the circumstances." I put *circumstances* in air quotes when I said it. I'd spent all night creating the journal entries. I even pulled out my old journals from before and used similar language.

"That's very *Gone Girl* of you," Piper said, and I couldn't help but laugh. "Unfortunately, it's probably not going to take the investigators long to figure that one out either." She took a deep breath, then pointed down the alley. The same direction she'd come from. "Go."

"What?"

"I said go. Get home to your family. They need you, and that's who you did this for." She motioned for me to leave again.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not going anywhere. What are you talking about? I did this, and I'll take responsibility for it."

Piper shook her head back at me. "You're not going down for this—I am. I'll sit with her until she's gone, and then I'll call it in. I'll tell them I did it."

It was too big a sacrifice. I couldn't let her make it. We weren't talking about some silly crime. This was murder. I'd done it, and I'd face the consequences. "I won't let you."

"Hannah, you have a family. That's more important than anything else. To both of us." She turned me around so we were facing each other. "Look at me. You have a child at home that needs you more now than he's ever needed you. He's going to be wrecked by this, and you've got to help him recover. You have to be there to walk him through it." She pointed to Janie's body. "You can't go to jail, but I can."

"You have a life too," I cried, pulling her close to me, "and it's just as important. Who's going to save the world if you're in prison? Huh? Think of all the people that need you."

She shrugged. "It'll only be for a little while. Just like you said. And besides, none of this would be happening if I'd just done a wellness check all those years ago. This isn't your wrong to make right—it's mine."

"Piper, that's not true," I said. Except that it was. Who knew what would've happened—how things might've been different—if she'd gone that day. Christopher and I might've never met Janie.

Suddenly, she took off her hoodie and pulled it over her head. For a second, I thought she was giving it to me, but she pushed me aside and straddled Janie's body with both legs instead. Janie's eyes were still open. There was a chance she was still breathing. Piper took her shirt and wiped the handle of the knife, erasing all my prints. Then, before I knew what she was doing and could stop her, she jerked it out in one swift movement. It released a torrent of blood and a violent scream from Janie.

Piper gripped the knife in her hands just like I'd done moments before, and just as Janie opened her mouth to scream again, she plunged it back into her. "Get out of here, Hannah!"

# CHAPTER TEN

## HANNAH

Christopher was waiting up for me when I got home as if it was any other evening. I stumbled into the house like I'd been drinking and put my purse on the entryway table.

He rushed toward me. "Oh my god, what happened? Are you okay? Did you get in a car accident? We have to get you to a doctor." His eyes hadn't move from my blood-splattered clothes, scanning me up and down. I could see the wheels spinning in his head. "Put your shoes back on." He whipped open the closet to grab his coat.

"It's not my blood."

He stopped in his tracks. "It's not your blood?" he asked without turning around, like he hadn't heard me the first time.

"It's not." Before he could ask me whose it was, I answered. "It's Janie's."

A tremble moved through his entire body. He still wouldn't face me. "Is she okay?"

"It's over," I said matter of factly. I'd sent Cole to my parents' for the night. He thought it was to cool off and give all of us a time-out, but I hadn't wanted him home for this.

"Hannah, what did you do?" He slowly turned around, like he was scared to look.

"She was a rabid dog, Christopher, and I put her down." I held back my smile, because that would be too much, but I was proud of myself for what I'd done. There would be no apologies for my actions.

"Get out of the way," he said, shoving me aside. "I can't stand to look at you right now."

I followed him through the living room and into the office. “She was going to spend the rest of her life hurting people. You know that. She’s already murdered two. Tortured how many others? And what did you think she was planning with Cole? A nice ride into the sunset with his big sis? I mean, come on. She was probably going to chop up his body and mail us his parts.”

“So, you killed her? You decided she needed to *die*?” His face twisted with emotion, and he backed up with each step I took closer to him. “Jesus, what’s wrong with you? You don’t get to decide if someone dies. You’re not God.”

“She killed my sister, and I wasn’t letting her do the same thing to my son.” I crossed my arms on my chest. “I’m protecting other people from going through what we went through. I’m stopping her from having any babies and carrying on the line. But most importantly, Christopher, I’m keeping her from killing anyone else, and you know she will. You know it.”

He looked more and more disgusted the longer I talked. How could he not understand what had to be done? It was the only way to stop her.

He just shook his head at me. “I can’t believe you. You’re no different than she is.”

“Are you kidding me right now? There’s a big difference between me and her. You know why?” I didn’t wait for him to answer. “The difference between us, Christopher? She would’ve enjoyed the killing. Probably taken her time and really enjoyed it. Me?” I pointed to my chest. “I’m just glad it’s over.”

“How do you expect to get away with this?”

“Oh, I don’t. Piper is still there, and she said she’s going to take the fall for it, but I’m not sure anyone will believe her. There’s a good chance they’ll still come for me even if she says she did it. I told her not to, that I \_\_\_”

“Wait. Piper was there? She’s part of this too?” The blood drained from his face.

I nodded. “She came after I’d stabbed Janie. She had no idea I was there or what I was planning. I told you she’s been following her too. She just happened to show up right after I’d done it. She made me leave even though I didn’t want to go, so now the only thing we can do is wait and see.”



“I can’t believe you.” He wouldn’t stop repeating himself or shaking his head.

“You can’t believe me? Believe this. We put down dogs when they have rabies. Once they get that poison in their blood and they turn on people? We don’t let them live. I did the same thing to her, Christopher. No different. I don’t care what she’s been through. Maybe being treated like an animal turned her into one, but either way—she’s an animal. A sick one, and we put sick animals down when they’re dangerous. It’s that simple.”

“People aren’t dogs.”

“They are when they act like savages.” I wouldn’t feel sorry about what I’d done, and he couldn’t make me. Maybe that made me like her in the end, but he could think whatever he wanted. So be it. I’d protected the one I loved and saved the world from a monster. It was finally over. She couldn’t hurt us or anyone else ever again.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2020 Jocelyn Snowdon*

Dr. Lucinda Berry is a former psychologist and leading researcher in childhood trauma. Now she writes full time, using her clinical experience to blur the line between fiction and nonfiction. She enjoys taking her readers on a journey through the dark recesses of the human psyche. Her work has been optioned for film and translated into multiple languages.

If Dr. Berry isn't chasing after her son, you can find her running through Los Angeles, prepping for her next marathon. To hear about her upcoming releases and other fun news, visit her on TikTok or sign up for her newsletter at <https://Lucindaberry.com>.

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“Lucinda Berry’s *The Secrets of Us* is a tense psychological thriller that explores the dark corners of the mind and turns a mind can take when it harbors secret guilt. The interplay between sisters Krystal and Nichole and their hidden past is gradually revealed, and in the end, the plot twists keep coming. Right and wrong can be ambivalent, and this story explores all

shades of gray, from their dysfunctional family to an old childhood friend to a husband who may or may not be too good to be true. Berry's background as a clinical psychologist shines in this novel with a character so disturbed they spend time in seclusion lockdown at a psychiatric ward. Don't miss this one!"

—Debbie Herbert, *USA Today* and Amazon Charts bestselling author

"*The Secrets of Us* is an utterly gripping, raw, and heartbreaking story of two sisters. Berry's flawlessly placed clues and psychological expertise grab you from the first word, not letting go until the last. Compelling, intricate, and shocking, this inventive thriller cleverly weaves from past to present with stunning precision. I was absolutely enthralled."

—Samantha M. Bailey, *USA Today* and #1 national bestselling author of *Woman on the Edge*

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