

Praise for *The Flight*

“*The Flight* is everything you want in a book: a gripping story of suspense; haunting, vulnerable characters; and a chilling and surprising ending that stays with you long after the last page.”

—Aimee Molloy, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Perfect Mother*

“I’m a sucker for suspense stories crafted around an airplane crash, and Julie Clark’s *The Flight* lived up to the hype and then some. Clark starts with a bang, then keeps the pace at full throttle, deftly weaving two seemingly separate stories into one wild and entertaining ride. The perfect combination of beautiful prose and high suspense, and an ending that I guarantee will catch you off guard.”

—Kimberly Belle, international bestselling author of *Dear Wife* and *The Marriage Lie*

“Strong women take center stage in this *Breaking Bad* meets *Sleeping with the Enemy* thriller. *The Flight* has it all—original characters, fast pacing, and clever twists, all in one explosive package!”

—Wendy Walker, national bestselling author of *The Night Before*

“*The Flight* sweeps you into a thrilling story of two desperate women who will do anything to escape their lives. Both poignant and addictive, you’ll race through the pages to the novel’s chilling end. A must-read of the summer!”

—Kaira Rouda, international bestselling author of *Best Day Ever* and *The Favorite Daughter*

“Julie Clark’s *The Flight* is a stunner: both a compelling, intricately woven tale of suspense and a thoughtful, nuanced portrayal of two very different

women, each at a dangerous crossroads in her life. I couldn't turn the pages fast enough!"

—Kathleen Barber, author of *Truth Be Told* and *Follow Me*

"*The Flight* will propel you headfirst into the frantic lives of two women, both determined to escape their current reality. Julie Clark weaves their stories effortlessly, delivering a pitch-perfect suspense novel that absolutely lives up to its hype. Do yourself a favor and pick this one up!"

—Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke, authors of *The Two Lila Bennetts*

**THE
FLIGHT**

JULIE CLARK

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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*Dedicated to all the women who have come forward with their stories.
Whether it be in front of a congressional panel on live television or alone
in a windowless human resources office—we hear you. We believe you.*

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.

—Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*

PROLOGUE

John F. Kennedy Airport, New York

Tuesday, February 22

The Day of the Crash

Terminal 4 swarms with people, the smell of wet wool and jet fuel thick around me. I wait for her, just inside the sliding glass doors, the frigid winter wind slamming into me whenever they open, and instead force myself to visualize a balmy Puerto Rican breeze, laced with the scent of hibiscus and sea salt. The soft, accented Spanish swirling around me like a warm bath, blotting out the person I was before.

The air outside rumbles as planes lift into the sky, while inside garbled announcements blare over the loudspeaker. Somewhere behind me, an older woman speaks in sharp, staccato Italian. But I don't look away from the curb, my eyes trained on the crowded sidewalk outside the terminal, searching for her, anchoring my belief—and my entire future—on the fact that she will come.

I know only three things about her: her name, what she looks like, and that her flight departs this morning. My advantage—she doesn't know

anything about me. I fight down panic that I might have missed her somehow. That she might already be gone, and with her, the opportunity for me to slip out of this life and into a new one.

People disappear every day. The man standing in line at Starbucks, buying his last cup of coffee before he gets into his car and drives into a new life, leaving behind a family who will always wonder what happened. Or the woman sitting in the last row of a Greyhound bus, staring out the window as the wind blows strands of hair across her face, wiping away a history too heavy to carry. You might be shoulder to shoulder with someone living their last moments as themselves and never know it.

But very few people actually stop to consider how difficult it is to truly vanish. The level of detail needed to eliminate even the tiniest trace. Because there's always something. A small thread, a seed of truth, a mistake. It only takes a tiny pinprick of circumstance to unravel it all. A phone call at the moment of departure. A fender bender three blocks before the freeway on-ramp. A canceled flight.

A last-minute change of itinerary.

Through the plate glass window, fogged with condensation, I see a black town car glide to the curb and I know it's her, even before the door opens and she steps out. When she does, she doesn't say goodbye to whoever is in the back seat with her. Instead, she scurries across the pavement and through the sliding doors, so close her pink cashmere sweater brushes against my arm, soft and inviting. Her shoulders are hunched, as if waiting for the next blow, the next attack. This is a woman who knows how easily a fifty-thousand-dollar rug can shred the skin from her cheek. I let her pass and take a deep breath, exhaling my tension. She's here. I can begin.

I lift the strap of my bag over my shoulder and follow, slipping into the security line directly in front of her, knowing that people on the run only look behind them, never ahead. I listen, and wait for my opening.

She doesn't know it yet, but soon, she will become one of the vanished. And I will fade, like a wisp of smoke into the sky, and disappear.

CLAIRE

Monday, February 21

The Day before the Crash

“Danielle,” I say, entering the small office that sits adjacent to our living room. “Please let Mr. Cook know I’m going to the gym.”

She looks up from her computer, and I see her gaze snag on the bruise along the base of my throat, concealed with a thin layer of makeup. I automatically adjust my scarf to cover it, knowing she won’t mention it. She never does.

“We have a meeting at Center Street Literacy at four,” she says. “You’ll be late again.” Danielle keeps track of my calendar and my missteps, and I’ve pegged her as the one most likely to report when I don’t arrive on time to meetings, or when I cancel appointments that my husband, Rory, deems important. *If I’m going to run for Senate, we don’t have the luxury of making mistakes, Claire.*

“Thank you, Danielle. I can read the calendar as well as you can.

Please have my notes from the last meeting uploaded and ready to go. I'll meet you there." As I leave the room, I hear her pick up the phone and my step falters, knowing this might draw attention at a time when I can't afford it.

People always ask what it's like being married into the Cook family, a political dynasty second only to the Kennedys. I deflect with information about our foundation, trained to keep my focus on the work instead of the rumors. On our third-world literacy and water initiatives, the inner-city mentoring programs, the cancer research.

What I can't tell them is that it's a constant battle to find any privacy. Even inside our home, people are there at all hours. Assistants. Household staff who cook and clean for us. I have to fight for every spare minute and every square inch to call my own. There is nowhere that's safe from the eyes of Rory's staff, all of them devoted Cook employees. Even after ten years of marriage, I'm still the interloper. The outsider who needs to be watched.

I've learned how to make sure there's nothing to see.

The gym is one of the few places Danielle doesn't follow, trailing after me with her lists and schedules. It's where I meet Petra, the only friend I have left from my life before Rory, and the only one Rory hasn't forced me to abandon.

Because as far as Rory knows, Petra doesn't exist.

When I arrive at the gym, Petra is already there. I change in the locker room, and when I climb the stairs to the rows of treadmills, she's on the landing, taking a clean towel from the stack. Our eyes meet for a moment, and then she looks away as I help myself to a towel.

"Are you nervous?" she whispers.

"Terrified," I say, turning and walking away.

THE FLIGHT

I run for an hour, my eyes on the clock, and when I step into the sauna at exactly two thirty with a towel wrapped around my body, my muscles ache with exhaustion. The air is thick with steam, and I smile at Petra, who sits alone on the top row, her face red with heat.

“Do you remember Mrs. Morris?” she asks when I sit down next to her.

I smile, grateful to think of something from a simpler time. Mrs. Morris was our government teacher in the twelfth grade, and Petra almost failed the class.

“You studied with me every afternoon for a month,” she continues. “When none of the other kids would come near me or Nico because of who our father was, you stepped up and made sure I graduated.”

I turn on the wooden bench to face her. “You make it sound like you and Nico were pariahs. You had friends.”

Petra shakes her head. “People being nice to you because your father is the Russian version of Al Capone doesn’t make them friends.” We’d attended an elite school in Pennsylvania, where the children and grandchildren of old money viewed Petra and her brother, Nico, as a novelty, sliding up to them, as if on a dare, to see how close they could get, but never letting either of them all the way in.

And so we’d formed a trio of outcasts. Petra and Nico made sure no one made fun of my secondhand uniform or the beat-up Honda my mother used to pick me up in, rattling its way to the curb, belching exhaust in its wake. They made sure I didn’t eat alone and dragged me to school events I’d have skipped otherwise. They put themselves between me and the other kids, the ones who made cruel, cutting remarks about how I was merely a day student on scholarship, too poor, too common to truly be one of them. Petra and Nico were friends to me at a time when I had none.

It felt like fate, the day I walked into the gym two years ago and saw Petra, an apparition from my past. But I wasn't the same person Petra would remember from high school. Too much had changed. Too much I'd have to explain about my life and what I'd lost along the way. And so I'd kept my gaze averted, while Petra's stare drilled into me, willing me to look up. To acknowledge her.

When my workout was over, I made my way to the locker room, hoping to hide out in the sauna until after Petra had left. But when I'd entered, she was there. As if that had been our plan all along.

"Claire Taylor," she said.

Hearing her say my old name made me smile despite myself. Memories came rushing back, found in the tone and cadence of Petra's voice that still carried a trace of the Russian she spoke at home. In an instant, I had felt like my old self, not the persona I'd cultivated over the years as Rory's wife, glossy and unknowable, burying her secrets beneath a hard surface.

We started slowly, making small talk that quickly turned personal as we caught up on the years since we'd last seen each other. Petra had never married. Instead, she drifted through life, supported by her brother, who now ran the family organization.

"And you," she said, gesturing toward my left hand. "You're married?"

I studied her through the steam, surprised she didn't know. "I married Rory Cook."

"Impressive," Petra said.

I looked away, waiting for her to ask what people always asked—what really happened to Maggie Moretti, the name that will forever be linked to my husband's, the girl who'd catapulted from anonymity to infamy simply because, long ago, she'd once loved Rory.

But Petra just leaned back on her bench and said, "I saw that interview he did with Kate Lane on CNN. The work he's done with the foundation is remarkable."

THE FLIGHT

“Rory is very passionate.” A response that conveyed truth, if anyone cared to dig deeper.

“How are your mom and sister? Violet must be done with college by now.”

I’d been dreading that question. Even after so many years, the loss of them was still sharp. “They died in a car accident fourteen years ago. Violet had just turned eleven.” I kept my explanation brief. A rainy Friday night. A drunk driver who ran a stop sign. A collision in which they both died instantly.

“Oh, Claire,” Petra had said. She didn’t offer platitudes or force me to rehash things. Instead she sat with me, letting the silence hold my grief, knowing there was nothing that could be said that would make it hurt less.

It became our routine, to meet in the sauna every day after our workouts. Petra understood that because of who her family was, we couldn’t be seen talking in public. Even before we knew what I was going to eventually do, we’d been cautious, rarely communicating by phone and never by email. But in the sauna, we resurrected our friendship, rebuilding the trust we used to share, remembering the alliance that had gotten us both through high school.

It didn’t take long for Petra to also see what I was hiding. “You need to leave him, you know,” she’d said one afternoon, several months after we’d first met. She was looking at a bruise on my upper left arm, the remnant of an argument Rory and I’d had two nights earlier. Despite my efforts to hide the evidence—a towel pulled higher around my chest, hung around my neck, or draped across my shoulders—Petra had silently watched the progression of Rory’s rage across my skin. “That’s not the first one of those I’ve seen on you.”

I covered the bruise with my towel, not wanting her pity. “I tried to, once. About five years ago.” I’d believed it was possible to leave my marriage. I’d prepared myself for a fight, knowing it would be messy and expensive, but I’d use his abuse as leverage. *Give me what I want and I’ll stay silent about the kind of man you are.*

But it hadn’t happened that way at all. “Turns out, the woman I’d confided in, who’d tried to help me, was married to an old fraternity brother of Rory’s. And when Rory showed up, her husband opened the door and let him in, *old boy-ing* himself right alongside Rory, secret handshake and all. Rory told them I was struggling with depression, working with a psychiatrist, and that maybe it was time for something inpatient.”

“He was going to have you committed?”

“He was letting me know that things could get a lot worse.” I didn’t tell Petra the rest. Like how, when we’d gotten home, he’d shoved me so hard into the marble counter in our kitchen, I’d cracked two ribs. *Your selfishness astonishes me. That you’d be willing to destroy all I’ve worked to build—my mother’s legacy—because we argue. All couples argue, Claire.* He’d gestured around the room, to the high-end appliances, the expensive countertops, and said, *Look around you. What more could you possibly want? No one is going to feel sorry for you. No one will even believe you.*

Which was true. People wanted Rory to be who they thought he was—the charismatic son of the progressive and beloved Senator Marjorie Cook. I could never tell anyone what he did to me, because no matter what I’d say or how loudly I’d say it, my words would be buried beneath the love everyone felt for Marjorie Cook’s only child.

“People will never see what I see,” I finally said.

“You really believe that?”

“Do you think if Carolyn Bessette came forward accusing JFK Junior of hitting her, the country would have rushed to support her?”

THE FLIGHT

Petra's eyes widened. "Are you kidding me? This is the #MeToo era. I think people would be falling all over themselves to believe her. They'd probably create new Fox and CNN shows just to talk about it."

I gave a hollow laugh. "In a perfect world, I'd hold Rory accountable. But I don't have it in me to take on a fight like that. One that would go on for years, that would seep into every corner of my life and tarnish anything good that might come afterward. I just want to be free of it. Of him."

To speak out against Rory would be like stepping into an abyss and trusting that I'd be caught by the generosity and kindness of others. And I'd lived too many years with people happily watching me free fall if it meant they could be close to Rory. In this world, money and power were equivalent to immunity.

I took a long breath and felt the steam reach down into my deepest corners. "If I left him, I'd have to do it in a way where he could never find me. Look what happened to Maggie Moretti."

The edges of Petra's face were blurry through the steam that billowed between us, but I could see her gaze sharpen. "Do you think he had something to do with that?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore," I answered.

Over the next year, Petra and I assembled a plan, choreographing my disappearance more carefully than a ballet. A sequence of events so perfectly timed, there could be no room for error, and now I sit, hours away from executing it. The hiss of steam clouds the air around us, Petra just a faint shadow on the cedar bench next to me. "Did you mail everything this morning?" I ask her.

"FedEx, addressed to you, labeled 'Personal.' It should arrive at the hotel first thing tomorrow."

I couldn't risk hiding all I'd gathered at my house, where anyone—the maids, or worse, Danielle—might find it. So Petra kept everything—forty thousand dollars of Rory's money and a brand new identity, thanks to Nico.

"The new government technology is making it harder to make these," he'd said, the afternoon I'd driven out to see him. We were sitting at his dining room table in his large home on Long Island. He'd grown into a handsome man, with a wife and three kids. And bodyguards—two posted at his gated driveway and another two at his front door. It occurred to me that Rory and Nico were not so different. Each of them the chosen son, pushed to carry the family into the twenty-first century, with new rules and regulations. Both expected to do more than the last generation—or at the very least, not lose everything.

Nico slid a fat envelope toward me, and I opened it, pulling out a pristine Michigan driver's license and a passport with my face and the name *Amanda Burns*. I flipped through the rest—a social security card, a birth certificate, and a credit card.

"You'll be able to do anything with these," Nico said, picking up the driver's license and tilting it under the light so I could see the hologram embossed on the surface. "Vote. Pay taxes. Fill out a W-2 form. This is high-level stuff, and my guy is the best. There's only one other person who can make a full package this good, and he lives in Miami." Nico handed me the credit card—a Citibank account with my new name on it. "Petra opened this last week, and the statements will be sent to her address. When you get settled, you can change it. Or toss this card and open a new one. Just be careful. You don't want someone to steal your identity."

He laughed at his joke, and I could see the boy he used to be flash across his face, sitting next to Petra and me at lunch, eating his sandwich while doing his math homework, the weight of who he was expected to become already bearing down on him.

THE FLIGHT

“Thanks, Nico.” I passed him the envelope containing ten thousand dollars, a small fraction of the money I’d managed to siphon off and squirrel away over the past six months. One hundred dollars here. Another two hundred there. Cash back whenever I could, slipping the money into Petra’s gym locker every day so she could hold it until I was ready.

His expression grew serious. “I need you to know that if something goes wrong, I can’t help you. Petra can’t help you. Your husband has resources that would put me, my livelihood—and Petra’s—at risk.”

“I understand,” I told him. “You’ve done more than enough, and I’m grateful.”

“I’m serious. All it takes is one tiny thread connecting your new life to your old one and it’ll all fall apart.” His dark eyes latched onto mine and held. “You can never go back. Not once. Not in any way, ever.”

“Rory’s scheduled the plane to leave around ten,” I tell Petra now. “Did you remember to include my letter? I don’t want to have to rewrite it on hotel stationery ten minutes before I leave.”

She nods. “In with the rest of it. Addressed and stamped, ready to be mailed from Detroit. What did you say?”

I think about the hours I’d spent, the many versions I’d shredded, drafting a letter that would close the door on any possibility that Rory might try to follow me. “I told him I was leaving, and that this time, he would never find me. That he should announce our separation publicly, tell them it was amicable and that I was not going to be giving any public statements or media interviews about it.”

“One week before he announces his run for Senate.”

I give her a smirk. “Should I have waited until after?”

Once I’d saved enough money to carry me into a new life, I began to

look for the perfect opening to leave. I studied our Google calendar of upcoming events, searching for a trip I'd be taking alone, focusing on cities near the Canadian or Mexican borders. I found it in the Detroit trip. I'm scheduled to visit Citizens of the World, a social justice charter school funded by the Cook Family Foundation. An afternoon school tour followed by an evening dinner with donors.

I lean back on the bench behind me and stare up at the ceiling, obscured by a layer of steam, and run through the rest of the plan. "We land around noon. The school event starts at two, so I'll make sure we go to the hotel first so I can get the package and put it somewhere safe."

"I called the car rental place. They're expecting a Ms. Amanda Burns to pick up a compact around midnight tonight. Will you be able to get a cab?"

"There's a Hilton just down the road from where I'm staying. I'll catch one from there."

"I worry about someone seeing you leave with a suitcase in the middle of the night. Following you. Calling Rory."

"I'm not taking it. I bought a backpack big enough for a couple changes of clothes and my money. I'm leaving everything else—including my purse and wallet—behind."

Petra nods. "If you need it, I booked a room with the credit card at the W in Toronto. They're expecting you."

I close my eyes, the heat making me woozy. Or perhaps it's the pressure of having to get every detail exactly right. There's no room for even the tiniest mistake.

I feel the minutes slipping away. Pushing me toward the moment when I'll take the first step in a series of steps that will be irrevocable. A part of me wants to forget it all. Go to Detroit, visit the school, and come home. Have more days in the sauna talking to Petra. But this is my chance to finally get out. Whatever options I have now will narrow to nothing once Rory announces his run for the Senate.

"Time to go." Petra's voice is soft, and my eyes open again.

THE FLIGHT

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I tell her.

“You were my only friend all those years ago. You don’t have to thank me. This is me, thanking you,” she says. “It’s your turn to be happy.” She tightens her towel around her body, and I can see the flash of her smile through the steam.

I can’t believe this is the last time we’ll sit here. The last time we’ll talk. This room has been like a sanctuary, dark and quiet, with just our whispered voices, plotting my escape. Who will sit here tomorrow with her? Or the day after that?

I feel the finality of my departure looming, how absolute that ending will be, and I wonder if it’ll be worth it. If it’ll be better. Soon, Claire Cook will cease to exist, the shiny pieces of her facade cracked and discarded. I have no idea what I’ll find underneath it all.

Thirty-three hours until I’m gone.

Want to find out what happens
next?
Shop The Flight now.