

The Return

Hodder & Stoughton

Hodder & Stoughton

The Return

Rachel Harrison

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

This paperback edition published in 2020

I

Copyright © Rachel Harrison 2020

The right of Rachel Harrison to be identified as the Author of the Work has
been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means
without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise
circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 529 35195 8
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 529 35196 5
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 35197 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

*For Grandpa, Babi, Nanny, and Pop Pop.
Sorry about the bad words!*

Hodder & Stoughton

Hodder & Stoughton

I

“What do you mean she’s missing?”

I watched frantic ants descend upon a nearby apple core and a facedown slice of pizza. A renegade splinter faction marched across the parking lot with tiny bits of food on their backs. The raccoons must have been in the garbage behind my office again, and I made a mental note to report it when I got back inside, but of course I would forget.

“She’s missing,” Molly said, her exasperation creeping through the receiver. “I don’t know how else to explain it to you.”

“She’s not missing.”

Above all else, I knew two truths about Julie. The first was that she was the most stubborn, most determined person I’d ever met. And the second was that she loved attention. Julie would never be missing. She might go dark, intentionally disappear for a few days here or there just to make sure someone noticed. A pop quiz: “Do

Rachel Harrison

you love me?” That, she was capable of. That, I believed. But missing, as in milk cartons and posters and hounds in fields—no way.

I told Molly as much.

“What year do you think this is? Milk cartons?”

“That’s my point. People don’t go missing anymore.”

“What? What world are you living in?”

I’d been asking myself that question for a long time. I didn’t have an answer for her.

“She left her house last Friday morning to go hiking, and she never came back. Tristan filed a missing person report. They have a team out looking for her.”

“Looking where?”

“Acadia National Park.”

“How’d you find out?”

“He called me.”

“He called you?”

“I don’t know why me, Elise, so don’t start.”

Tristan was Julie’s husband. None of us had ever met him. They had gone to the same high school and reconnected when Julie returned to her gloomy Massachusetts hometown to take care of her sick mother. They got married before her mom died so she could be there. The ceremony and reception were held in someone’s backyard. We were sent two pictures from that day. One was of Julie and Tristan cutting a two-tiered pale yellow cake topped with sugared daisies. The other was of Julie standing in a patch of generous sunlight, smiling with her head back, as if she was midlaugh, or the weight of her happiness was too much for her neck. She wore a birdcage veil.

It was a shock to all of us. It might have been the shock of our lives, had she not gone missing.

The Return

“What do we do?” I asked Molly.

“I don’t think there’s anything to do. Just gotta wait. And prepare ourselves.”

I dug into my back pocket for my lighter. It was a white one. Julie once told me white lighters were bad luck. I cleared my throat.

“It’s been how many days? Four? Five?”

“I thought you’d be freaking out.”

“Have you told Mae?”

“Are you smoking?” she asked me.

“No.”

“Yes, I called Mae first, because I thought she’d be the calm, logical one. She was very upset. I know because she said she was very upset.”

Mae was hardwired to think showing emotion was bad manners. She had a sensitive nature, but she tried her best to suppress it. She never wanted to put anyone out by acknowledging she had feelings of her own.

An airplane groaned somewhere above the clumpy gray clouds. The rush of nicotine distracted me, and I missed something Molly said.

“Sorry?”

She scoffed. Molly was the funny one, so it was easy to forget that when she wasn’t being funny, she was being mean. She was capable of empathy, but on a case-by-case basis. Childhood bone cancer had taken her left leg below the knee, and sometimes she joked that was where all her patience had been.

“This is serious.”

“I know,” I said, the lie leaving a chalky residue in my mouth.

She wasn’t missing.

This was classic Jules. She could fool Molly and Mae, but not me.

Rachel Harrison

She and I were made of the same stuff. It was the special sauce of our friendship, and the curse that made it turn ugly sometimes. Molly described our passive-aggressive fights as “tangos.” Mae would frown and say, “There’s only tension because you two are so similar.” When things were good between us, we would brag about our similarities, say we were soul sisters. When they weren’t, we both knew it was like spitting at a mirror.

There were times when I fantasized about vanishing. Chucking my phone through a sewer grate and taking the train to God knows where with nothing but a stack of cash. Cutting my hair with dull scissors in a shitty motel room. And if I had thought about it, Julie had thought about it, too.

During one of our late-night dorm room confessionals, we had bonded over obsessively imagining our own funerals. Which exes would show? Would they cry? Who else would cry? Who would give the eulogy? What would they say about us? Would our parents ever move on?

“We’re so fucked-up,” she said, giggling into her beloved pufferfish pillow.

“If I die first, will you give the eulogy?” I asked.

“You know I will,” she said. “And I’ll make it all about me.”

The end of my cigarette was pure ash. I flicked the butt into a nearby puddle.

I didn’t know what else to say to Molly. In a few days, Julie would resurface and exonerate me and my lack of reaction.

“What do you think happened?” I asked.

“You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“Honestly, Lise, I think she’s gone. I feel like she’s dead. I looked up the park, and it’s all woods and cliffs and ocean, and she was

The Return

there by herself. Alone! I don't want to be negative, but I have to say it out loud or I'll explode. Don't tell anyone. Especially not Mae."

"I won't," I said. "And Julie's not dead. Don't worry."

I told her I had to get back to work, said I loved her and would call her later. After we hung up, I walked around back to check the garbage bins. Raccoon ravaged. Trash everywhere. Possessed by some dormant Girl Scout goodness, I went to turn the bins upright. I leaned over with my hands outstretched, and beyond the tips of my fingers, I noticed movement. A wriggling. White spots. The spots swam in and out of the banana peels and half-eaten sandwiches, the fuzzy avocados and open containers of yogurt.

Maggots.

I thought I should scream, but I couldn't muster one. Instead, I backed up slowly, as if from a crime scene, until I was far enough away to safely turn my back. Still, I felt like they were on me. Like maybe one had burrowed in through the bottom of my shoe, crawled up my leg, my spine, and was now perched on my shoulder, waiting to climb into my ear and, eventually, eat my brain.

What I remember most about that day is I was more disturbed by the maggots than I was by the news about Julie. I didn't think for a second that she could be gone.

I went back to my desk and let the day pass.

When the day bled into a week, I looked up Acadia National Park. I scrolled through images of sprawling nature, a lighthouse nestled atop a rocky bluff. A mountain called Cadillac, its slope etched with trails. It seemed awfully mild. Blue sea, blue sky. Pine trees. Piles of stones worn smooth by the ocean. I refined my search.

"Acadia National Park—death."

Rachel Harrison

It was possible to die there. But people die everywhere. People die at Disneyland.

“Acadia National Park—missing.”

There it was.

Julie’s face.

I closed my laptop and stuffed it under my bed, kingdom of dust bunnies and lone socks, among other things I didn’t want to deal with.

I woke up every morning forgetting. I would remember with my toothbrush molar deep, or while beating an egg, or on my third attempt to start the damn car. If I hadn’t already, I would remember on my way to work, when I passed the roadkill, what was maybe once a deer? A large fox? An unfortunate dog? It was on the shoulder now, a pink mound of guts that refused decomposition.

One day the roadkill was gone, and when I got to work, I shut myself in a bathroom stall and tried to make myself cry. I told myself Julie was gone. Dead. Had died alone in nature.

“Ninety-nine percent of the time, it’s good,” she had told me during one of our last conversations, a few weeks before she had gone missing.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The one percent.”

After years of practice, I had finally figured out how to deal with Julie’s relationship drama. Instead of voicing my concern, huffing and puffing, disapproving, giving advice that would go untaken, offering ultimatums, I was now relentlessly supportive. It disoriented her. She’d spin around in circles until the truth spilled out.

“I mean, you guys are so in love. And you’re starting this bed-and-breakfast. It’s really exciting! Not all couples can go into business together,” I said. “You’re super compatible.”

The Return

“We’re not, though. He’s simple.”

“That’s bad?”

“He doesn’t understand me,” she said. “He’s my husband, and he doesn’t get it.”

“Did you end up making it legal?”

When she had sent us the pictures from the wedding—her way of telling us she’d had one—they were captioned “Don’t worry, not legal. For mom.” I figured it was a lie, an attempt to rationalize why we weren’t invited and diminish the gossip the three of us would inevitably engage in behind her back. She knew we would be talking about it, about her. She wanted to protect herself. But we knew the truth.

The wedding hadn’t been for her mom. The wedding was because she really did love him. That was how she loved. Hard and fast. Until whoever she loved loved her back, or until she got bored.

“He’s my husband,” she repeated, which could have been confirmation but maybe not.

“It’s not like with Dan. You’re not fighting all the time.”

“He doesn’t react to anything. Sometimes I want to push him into a wall just to see what he’ll do.”

“Healthy.”

“Lise.”

“Maybe you miss your mom. Maybe you need time to clear your head. To allow yourself to grieve.”

There had been no funeral. Julie’s mom, Beth, was a character. A chain-smoker, silk nightgowns with feather slippers at the supermarket, fake eyelashes and red lipstick. She’d been married three times. The first when she was seventeen, after legally emancipating herself from abusive parents. The second to Julie’s father at twenty-two. She’d had Julie’s sister, Jade, then Julie. Then, after something

happened that Julie never talked about, Beth married her third husband, a guy who did something with boats and had a lot of money. She got half of it in the divorce.

Beth's illness had been long and drawn out. She got to say all her good-byes. At the end, she told Julie, "Burn me and scatter my ashes someplace pretty, would you?"

"I was there every day," Julie said. "I grieved."

"Okay," I said. "I just think it's a lot all at once. You went from being a caretaker to being a wife, and now you're opening a business in a new state and doing a whole renovation. When did you have time to process any of this? Have you had any time for yourself?"

"No. I haven't. You're right."

"Take a few days. Get back to yourself."

"Right. I know you're right."

"I go crazy without my alone time," I said. That had been true at some point in the past, but then I was alone all the time, and that was bad, too.

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too."

"I want to get this place up and running so you guys can come. But I want you to come first so we get some one-on-one QT. I miss you most. Don't tell them, though."

"Secret's safe with me."

"We've got the great big porch that wraps all the way around. I keep picturing us out there, drinking whiskey under blankets and stargazing. I love Maine. The sky is so beautiful here, Lise. I don't understand how some patches of sky are more beautiful than others. How does that work?"

"Nature! Science!"

The Return

She laughed. "That stuff."

"All right, I should get going," I said, surrendering to sleepiness.

"G'night. Love you."

"Love you. Talk soon."

I pressed down on the memory like a bruise and felt nothing.

At six months, Mae suggested we write Julie letters and bury them someplace special to us.

"My therapist thinks it's a good idea," she said.

"Since when are you in therapy?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"What are we doing?" she asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"We're not doing anything. We have no control over the situation. It's not constructive. It's not good for us. Mentally, emotionally."

Yeah, duh. Of course our best friend's going missing wasn't good for us emotionally. But I couldn't say that to Mae. Besides, she had a point.

"Did you write her something?" I asked.

"Not yet."

I thought about what it would be like to give Julie the letters when she came back. How she would hold them in her hands, then up to the light like diamonds, then tight to her chest, as if they might absorb through her clothes and into her skin. The precious evidence of how much we missed her.

This vision was uniquely mine. By then, I was the only one who believed she was still alive. I was the only one who believed her

Rachel Harrison

disappearance was a sham. I was convinced Julie was somewhere reveling in solitude and not willing to give it up just yet. She'd come back for us, though.

I'd committed myself to this belief. It was the only way I could function.

"I bought paper," Mae said. "This beautiful, expensive stationery from a shop in Soho. And a wax seal kit I'll never use again."

"I'm going to get a letter from you in a few weeks with a wax seal. Written with a calligraphy pen."

"I bought one of those, too."

I laughed.

"It made perfect sense at the time."

"I'm sure it did."

"Elise," she said, "you should probably see someone."

"A therapist?"

"Yes."

"I don't do therapy," I said. "Julie doesn't, either."

Mae made a clicking noise with her tongue, signaling to me her displeasure. It was a habit she had picked up from her mother. I thought maybe it was a Southern thing. Mae had been raised in a suburb of Atlanta by two born-and-bred sweet tea come-to-Jesus Georgians. She had an accent she tried her best to subdue because it only provoked more of the "Where are you from?" and "What are you?" questions she was inundated with daily.

"I'm from China," she would answer. "I'm Chinese."

But it was never enough, because then they wouldn't understand the Southern accent, or because they were still wondering about her skin and her hair.

So, for a while, she ended up giving away her life story to satisfy obnoxious strangers.

The Return

“I was adopted from China. I grew up in Atlanta. I have albinism.”

“It’s exhausting,” she told me once.

“Then don’t do it anymore,” I said. “Just don’t say anything.”

“Doesn’t work that way.”

She and Molly would talk, but with Molly it was different. Not many people asked about her prosthetic. They assumed cancer or combat. They tried to be polite. Not with Mae, though.

To think about it was a quick way to hate the world.

“I love you, Maeb’s. I’ll think about the letter.”

“It’s an idea. You don’t have to,” she said. “But it’s something.”

A week passed, and I considered it. But then I thought, *Why write a letter? I’ll just tell her when she gets back. Whatever I have to say, I’ll tell her in person.*

At a year, their hope expired. They weren’t looking for a body; they were looking for bones. Julie’s husband decided to hold what he called a “memorial service.”

“Funeral. It’s a funeral,” Molly ranted while we coordinated travel. “Why not call it a fucking funeral?”

“I don’t know. He only talks to you. Why don’t you ask him?”

“He doesn’t talk to me. He only has my number.”

“How?”

“No idea.”

“Is he nice?”

“He’s fine,” she said. “I’m getting in at two p.m. I hate flying east. I’m going to be wrecked.”

“That’s what you get for living in Los Angeles.”

“Don’t city-shame me right now. We’re going to our best friend’s funeral.”

Rachel Harrison

“Don’t use our best friend’s funeral as an excuse to get out of being city-shamed.”

“Fair. But you live in Buffalo, so get off my ass.”

I wanted to remind her it wasn’t quite by choice, but that was a whole thing, so I decided it was better to change the subject.

“What are you wearing?”

“We’re dysfunctional. You know that?” she asked me.

“I’m aware.”

“Just checking.”

“When does Mae get in?” I asked.

“Three, I think. Let me see,” she said. “Oh, Tristan offered for us to stay there. At their house slash bed-and-breakfast or whatever.”

“Really?”

“I don’t think it’s, like, a functioning bed-and-breakfast. I think he still lives there, though.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“Do you think we should? Or would it be too weird?”

“I’m poor, so yes, let’s.”

“All right, all right.”

I spent the long drive with my hands clasped tight around the steering wheel, my knuckles ten pale hills. I looked down at my black dress, my black shoes, my black jacket crumpled in the passenger seat, the black road ahead going on and on like a cruel fate. She wouldn’t be there. She wouldn’t be stiff in a box, fenced in by flower arrangements and sniffing aunts. But I knew that didn’t matter to anyone except me. They would all mourn her anyway.

Even if her body was there, lying in an open casket with her hands folded, in a modest dress she undoubtedly wouldn’t have been happy about; even if I walked up and saw her, touched her cold

The Return

cheek; even then, would I believe it? What was the proof I needed, and was I crazy for needing it in the first place? Not neurotic crazy, or crazy with grief, but clinically insane?

When I got to the house, I found Molly and Mae sitting on the great big porch Julie had told me about. The house didn't disappoint. A mammoth Victorian she had bought with her mother's money. A giant dollhouse. It was really something to see it in person.

"This house is just like her. A little too much," I said to them as we hugged. They both hung on too long, limp with grief.

I saw a man hovering nearby. I recognized him from the wedding picture. He recognized me, too.

"Hi," he said. "You must be Elise."

"Must be," I said. I shook his hand because he offered it. I could feel his calluses.

"Tristan. Thank you for coming."

He got called away by someone delivering food. As soon as his back was turned to us, we huddled.

"He's not her type," I said. He was too generic. All-American. Probably knew all the words to "Sweet Caroline." Drank a lot of milk.

"He seems nice," Mae said. "Genuine."

"He keeps messing with his tie," Molly said.

We had our suspicions back then. He had been the last person to see her. They had gotten married pretty quickly, and people always blame the husband.

When she had first gone missing, he sat through long police interviews, underwent questioning. They searched the house, his truck. They did an extensive background check. They called up his ex-girlfriends to ask about him. "Was he ever aggressive toward you?" Stuff like that.

Rachel Harrison

The cops never officially announced him as a suspect, but that wasn't enough to silence the speculation. There were people who thought, *Yeah, well, maybe he was just after her inheritance.*

Of course we wondered.

But as the day went on, he was so clearly distraught, all it took was one look among the three of us, and he was acquitted.

"I think part of me wanted to believe it was him, just to have an answer," Molly said later that night when we were on the porch sharing a thick wool blanket and a bottle of whiskey.

"He's just so sad," Mae said. "It's so sad."

We stayed up all night, not wanting to leave one another's company. They swapped stories about Jules or cried or passed the bottle back and forth in time-bending silence. I stared at the sky, a dizzying display of stars that seemed to multiply in the blur of their own brightness, melting the darkness out of the night for shades of purple and evergreen, swarming up toward what might have been heaven.

A year and five months. I took a painfully long bus ride from Buffalo to Manhattan to visit Mae. She gave me the grand tour of her luxe new Tribeca apartment. Money had never been an object for Mae. Her dad was a successful lawyer and her mom a sought-after interior designer. An only child, she had wanted for nothing. Horseback riding and ballet lessons, multiple trips to Disney World, a miniature castle of her own custom-built in the backyard. She had been given creative freedom and a credit card, a combination that birthed a love of fashion. She worked as a stylist and, apparently, did well for herself.

I wasn't jealous. I skipped straight to shame. I thought of my sad

The Return

studio apartment with disgusting old carpet, kitchen cabinets loose on rusty hinges, a bum landlord who would never forgive me for that one time I paid my rent late. I thought of my dumb office job, the credits I had squandered abandoning my master's degree, the behemoth of student loan debt that haunted my life. I made all the wrong choices. Mae made the right ones.

There was a framed picture of the four of us on her nightstand. We stood on some street corner with water bottles full of vodka, on our way to a party that wouldn't be worth it. We smiled, our teeth white from the drugstore strips we used religiously, our cheeks fat and rosy with youth. Molly and Mae were in the middle, Julie and I the bookends.

Julie wore her favorite jeans with rips at the knees, a T-shirt too tight and too low, her bottle blond hair down and curly, and her ridiculous black heels. She always wore heels to parties. She was her mother's daughter.

"It's a good one of us," I told Mae.

She ignored me, shifted the conversation to our dinner plans.

She took me to a Mexican restaurant where we ordered prickly pear margaritas and overpriced tacos. After, we went barhopping in the West Village with her fancy fashion friends. They asked me minimal questions before veering the conversation to industry gossip. I had nothing to contribute so I drank excessively and excused myself for cigarettes.

"If Molly knew, she'd kill you," Mae warned me.

"But she doesn't know," I said.

Standing on the city sidewalk, with drunk college kids stumbling past, good-looking couples holding hands and eating ice-cream cones, I wanted nothing more than to call Julie. She was the only one who would understand. She knew what it was like to feel so

Rachel Harrison

lonely you could die. I wouldn't have to explain it to her, or how being in this city of millions of people was worse than being alone in my apartment. I could say all of that, and she would relate. Then I wouldn't be lonely anymore, because she was out there. She existed.

Looking back, I realize it was the first time I allowed her absence to panic me. Too much time had passed. How come she hadn't surfaced? I knew she wasn't in the park anymore. I supposed she had left, gone to Canada, sublet a room. But how long could she keep it up?

Mae came out to check on me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I lied. "Tired from the bus."

"You want to go?"

I nodded. "Sorry."

"That's okay," she said. "I have to close my tab. We can get a car."

When we got back to her apartment, she pulled out the couch for me and made it up with clean sheets that smelled like the beach in a good way.

"We'll brunch in the morning," she said. "Thank you for coming. I like having you here."

"I like being here."

"We need to see each other more. The three of us."

"I know."

"Molly's a lost cause. But I keep faith I can convince you to move back to New York."

"I'd have to sell a kidney," I said.

"I'd find you a buyer."

"I hope you're kidding."

She raised an eyebrow. "Good night."

The Return

. . .

A year and ten months, six days. A snowstorm on the first of April. Ha-ha.

It was apocalyptic snow. White as marshmallows but dense as cement. Cars swallowed. Roofs collapsed.

Work was canceled. Everything closed. Fair warning and a backup generator were my saviors. I moved my bed away from the window, piled on every blanket I owned, ate peanut butter sandwiches and drank hot chocolate I made with half-and-half. I tucked a jug of water in bed next to me. A tip I got when I first moved to Buffalo was to stay hydrated in winter, because the weather's so harsh it'll dry out your skin. It was advice I had ignored at first, only to watch my extremities turn to ash.

I witnessed the accumulation of snow through my window until it covered the glass, and on the third day I couldn't remember what sunlight was like.

"Jules," I said. Talking to her out loud when I was alone was a habit I had developed after coming back from Manhattan. "Look, Jules."

Julie liked the snow. In college, she would drag me to the common room and make us "hot toddies" (microwaved water, contraband bourbon, honey, a splash of ginger ale), and we would watch the flurries shimmy their way down.

In the absence of light, time became something fun and elusive. I would guess. Midnight? Three p.m.? Had I slept past noon, or was it five o'clock in the morning? Did it matter?

I stalked the far reaches of my apartment. I cleaned out my closet, manufacturing a mountain of doleful clothes to donate to

Rachel Harrison

Goodwill. I threw out two boxes of long-expired Pop-Tarts, stale English muffins, unsalted peanuts I had bought by mistake. I scrubbed my oven. I opened the record player Julie got me for my twenty-fifth birthday so I could play the only record I owned, *Back to Black*, Julie's gift for my twenty-fourth birthday.

I danced around in my socks.

"Julie, you're the best dancer," I said. "In general, but definitely out of the four of us. Mae would just find a wall to lean on and do that sort of swaying thing. She didn't need to do much. Her in her, like, satin bomber jacket and Ray-Bans. Molly doesn't really dance, either. She goes and plays beer pong or darts or whatever to get out of it. I figured it's pretty much impossible for me to look cool, so why not dance with you? You liked to dance. I acted like I hated it, but I always had fun dancing with you."

I paused for a response, and when I didn't get one, I said, "Yeah, yeah. You knew it, too."

I said, "You'd think after being stuck in the same room for days, the room would seem smaller, but it doesn't."

"You forget what it's like to leave. To be somewhere else."

"We're adaptable," I said with a definitive nod. Outside, the wind howled like somebody dying.

"Stay somewhere long enough, it becomes your world."

"Actually," I told Julie, "I hate this place."

And I could see her beside me, rolling her eyes, chewing on a straw.

It was around then that it really started to eat at me, in a way I could no longer control. What if something had gone wrong? An unsettling amount of time had passed. What if she was chained up in

The Return

some cult leader's basement, carving notches into the wall to mark the passing days, subsisting on pastelike oatmeal and brownish water and the occasional kindness from Mr. Discount Koresh, who was crazy but conflicted?

Children are taken from sidewalks. Plucked from bus stops by strangers in old, unassuming station wagons. You read stories. Ones that turn your eyes into magnets. It's almost like it's against your will, or that's what you want to believe. You don't want to admit that you're interested. That you want to know about the duct tape or the DNA evidence found in the trunk of the car when it turns up months later, even though the kid never does.

Women are kidnapped in parking garages, at Laundromats, from their beds, while out for their morning runs. It happens all the time. Taken by men who feel a sense of entitlement, a right to female bodies. Men who were dropped on their heads as babies or raised by mommie dearest.

Julie wouldn't have gone quietly. Julie would have screamed, thrashed around, bitten, scratched, gouged. Julie would have made things bloody. She wouldn't have vanished without a trace.

But she had. They never found anything. Not a scrap of clothing. Not a scent. Not a single witness.

Had she been abducted by aliens? Would I turn into one of those conspiracy theorists who put newspapers over the windows and hissed at the mailman?

Would I take the case into my own hands? Buy a corkboard and a bunch of red yarn from a craft store, stand in line at checkout among the disgruntled parents helping with science projects or costumes for the school play? Would I print out a map of Acadia State Park at a FedEx Office? Pay the extra few bucks for color? Tack it to my wall and stare at it, waiting for clarity?

Rachel Harrison

My friends thought I was in denial. They discussed it together and confronted me separately.

“I don’t know if you’re dealing with it well or not dealing with it at all,” Mae said.

“You have to accept the reality of the situation,” Molly said.

“I hear you,” I said, an acknowledgment to get them off my back. I lied and told them I would look into therapy.

I didn’t need therapy. I explored it on my own, this idea of denial. It didn’t feel like denial. It felt like I knew the truth and everyone around me was a skeptic. I wasn’t bothered by it at first because the truth was enough, but it wasn’t anymore. It was isolating.

It would have been easier to trade my truth for the ordinary Kübler-Ross, weekly sessions on a somewhat comfortable couch with a box of cheap sandpapery tissues. But I couldn’t. I clung to it.

Two years to the day after she went missing, Tristan found her sitting on the porch swing. She was wearing the same clothes she’d had on when she disappeared. She did not seem confused or disoriented, but she had no memory of where she’d been for the past twenty-four months.

Her return was national news.

She was taken to the hospital. The doctors invaded her with needles and cotton swabs, attached her to sinister-looking machines that made unpleasant sounds. She was analyzed by psychologists and questioned by police.

Aside from the gap in her memory, she seemed to be perfectly stable.

“She’s doing great,” Tristan said. “She’s been very calm.”

The Return

Calm? Julie? I'd never known Julie to be calm. She had caught the flu sophomore year, and I'd had no choice but to carry her to the school nurse for Tamiflu. She had cried like I was taking her to the gallows. She hated, hated, *hated* doctors. All doctors. She refused to get a physical. She had a severe phobia of needles. She was panic-stricken whenever there was a blood drive nearby. Seeing the Band-Aid on someone else's arm was enough to make her shriek. I didn't buy that she was "calm" about being confined to a hospital, at the mercy of doctors.

"Are you sure it's her?" I asked. A joke, kind of.

"That's not funny," he said. But then he added, "It's her."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Not yet."

"Who decides that?"

"The doctors. Not me."

I relented.

I expected more relief. Relief that she was back safe. Relief that I wasn't crazy. That, actually, I was very intuitive and should maybe consider an alternate career as an oracle. I thought relief would fill the vacancy of anticipation. The wonderings and what-ifs that had occupied my mind for so long.

But there was no relief, not really. Only more questions.

Her return disturbed my rituals. It created new ones. After work, I would run five miles, take a hot shower, a cold shower, drink an indeterminate amount of whiskey, put myself to bed and wait for sleep. When it eluded me, I would check the news to make sure I hadn't dreamed up her return. I would reread the articles about her coming back.

Sometime after I stopped reading but before morning, I would

Rachel Harrison

notice a numbness in my fingers and toes. It spread slowly, and I would lie there helpless as I lost parts of myself to it, until I became completely paralyzed.

I couldn't move my head to see, but I felt like there was something there, at the foot of my bed, or maybe standing beside it. I imagined its breath, hot and rancid. And when I was so sure of its presence I thought I might scream, I would fall asleep.

I would wake up in the morning to a new truth. Dread.

"Elise?"

"Julie?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The sound of her voice did it. Two years' worth of tears burst out.

"Don't cry," she said.

"Don't tell me what to do."

She laughed, and I was certain. It was her.

"I missed you, Jules."

"I miss you always," she said. "Before you ask, I have no memory. None."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"But you're thinking about it."

"I promise you I'm not."

"Good."

"Am I allowed to ask if you're okay?"

"Yeah. Yes, I'm okay. I've essentially woken up a lab rat, but overall, I'm fine. I feel fine. I feel good."

The Return

“Good?”

“I mean, a little freaked out. But good. I always knew I would be famous. I thought it would be for winning an Oscar or whatever. Not for this.”

“Marrying famous.”

“Yeah, meeting an A-list actor in rehab and walking the red carpet. Who’s so-and-so’s new mystery girl?”

“Five facts about Hottie McHandsome’s new girlfriend.”

“Right?” she said. “But, yeah, I don’t know about this.”

“Mm.”

“I don’t want to be known for this.”

“You won’t be,” I said.

“I lost two years, Lise.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could I say? A mass of sadness lodged itself in my throat.

“The last thing I remember is waking up that morning, sitting on the porch, drinking coffee out of my favorite mug and thinking about the hike. Then nothing. Not until I was back on the porch.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her, but I was sure I didn’t care.

“I knew you’d come back,” I said. “M and M thought I was crazy. They tried to get me to see a shrink.”

“Did you?”

“Come on.”

“I wouldn’t have, either.”

“I know, Jules.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. So, so much.” And because I can’t resist ruining a moment, I asked, “You sure it wasn’t aliens?”

“Don’t even.”

Rachel Harrison

“I’m kidding. Kind of. When can I see you?”

She erupted into a coughing fit so brutal, I pulled the phone away from my ear. It lasted a solid minute.

“Julie?”

“Yeah,” she said between coughs. “Sorry.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Don’t keep asking me.”

“Okay.”

“Can I call you right back? I need water.”

“Yep.”

She hung up. I took the opportunity to pee. Living alone, I had developed a habit of leaving the bathroom door open. I don’t know why I did it. Because I could. Because I’m horribly lazy. Ever since I had moved into my studio, I peed with the door open.

I kept my phone faceup at my feet in case she called back right away, and I was looking at the screen when I heard the creak of hinges. I turned just in time to watch as the bathroom door crept forward, shutting itself almost completely.

I knew it was a draft. My building was old, decrepit. Still, what if it wasn’t? What if there was someone in my apartment? My best friend had just reappeared after vanishing for two years. Anything was possible.

I wiped myself, flushed the toilet, locked the door and washed my hands. I checked behind the shower curtain, which I had failed to notice was pulled across even though I usually left it open to save myself the trouble of wondering what was behind it.

I couldn’t tell what was worse—feeling alone in my apartment or not alone.

The Return

I don't know what I would have done if Julie hadn't called back right then. Hid in the bathroom forever, maybe.

"Hey," she said. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay," I said. "I missed you."

"Just now?" she asked.

"Yeah, just now."

"Me, too," she said. "I want to see you, too. I need a few weeks."

"Oh," I said, pushing the bathroom door open and sticking my head out, scanning for something unusual. Coast was clear.

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad."

"You sound mad."

"I'm not. Cross my heart," I said. "Take all the time you need. Only not too much."

"I think I just need a good mope, you know? I'll get back to feeling like myself again. I'm not there yet, but I will be. Soon."

"I'll mope with you. If you want to mope, I'm happy to mope."

"That's sweet. But we'll see each other soon, I promise," she said. "We'll go somewhere. Do something fun."

It wasn't unlike her. Julie was never good at sitting still, but under the circumstances, it caught me off guard.

"Are you sure? I'll come to you, Jules. Just say the word."

"Tristan's been hovering nonstop since I got back. Not that I blame him, but it'd be good to get out of the house. Be back in the world again. But sorry. I've actually got to go. I love you."

"I love you. I can't tell you how good it is to hear your voice again."

"Oh, darlin'. I'll call you tomorrow."

I couldn't stop myself from opening my laptop and searching for her name. Reading the articles for the thousandth time. A form of pinching myself.

. . .

Her coming back didn't surprise me. Not on any level. What did surprise me was her genuine lack of interest in media attention. I expected her to lean in, do interviews, pose for the cover of *People* magazine, fish for a book deal. The interest was there—she was headline news, but she wasn't keen on the spotlight. I found that highly unusual.

Julie had grown up wanting to be an actress. She had taken the bus to New York by herself at fourteen and been told by a casting director she was too fat. It devastated her. She remembered crying on a bench in Washington Square Park, callous strangers walking past. The more they ignored her, the louder she cried, until she realized she wasn't crying because she was sad anymore; she just wanted someone to notice.

She marched back uptown to the casting director and insisted on seeing him again. She made such a scene that the receptionist caved. The guy said she was pretty and had potential, and to come back and see him after she lost fifteen, no, better make that twenty pounds.

She returned to Massachusetts with an eating disorder. It outlasted her acting dream. Acting shifted to singing, which somehow evolved into a marketing major. After graduating, she had moved out to California with Molly and gotten a job as an assistant at a record label. She was there for about a year before working her way up the West Coast, doing a short stint in San Francisco, then in Seattle.

"I want to focus on travel," she had said when she called to tell me she quit her job.

"What about health insurance?" I asked.

"What about it?"

The Return

After a bad breakup in Seattle, she had moved to Tokyo for six months. She taught English to cute, enthusiastic students she got too attached to. But she couldn't stay in Tokyo—some visa issue, I think—so she took herself on a wild European adventure: Croatia, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands. She spent all her money and called me from a café in Amsterdam, laughing. “I don't know how I'm going to get home.”

“Put on the red light,” I told her.

“Don't joke.”

I think Mae ended up transferring her the money for a return flight. She slept on Mae's couch for a few weeks when she got back to the States. She contemplated putting down roots in New York City, but then her mom got sick.

Then she met Tristan. He had the idea to start the bed-and-breakfast in Maine. They found an old place with good bones. They were going to live off the summer tourist income and travel during the winter. It was a romantic plan, but all of Julie's plans were romantic. Mine were, too. The only difference was hers always seemed to work out. Mine crashed and burned.

Mae and Molly were both, in general, considerably more realistic. But something in Julie's return sparked a temporary lapse in their practicality.

“Girls' trip,” Molly said.

It was so obvious to me that it was a bad idea. I started shaking my head, the way a baby does to avoid a spoonful of mashed peas. “I don't think Julie is ready.”

“It was her idea. She said she talked to you about it.”

“Kind of.”

“Wouldn't be until the fall. We give her the summer to recuperate and then the four of us go away together.”

Rachel Harrison

“Go away where?”

“Mae has a place. This hotel in upstate New York. You wouldn’t even have to fly.”

“Good, because I can’t afford to fly. Is the hotel expensive?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I thought you would be excited.”

I was, but I’d envisioned some time for just me and Julie. I had no doubt Julie was struggling more than she let on. If I had her one-on-one, I could probably get her to open up. Plus, the group dynamic overwhelmed me sometimes. It could be the most fun I ever had. It could also unearth insecurities. Who was in on what inside jokes? Who was present for what? Who remembered what? Who knew the secrets the others didn’t? Were Molly and Mae closer than Julie and I? Were Mae and I actually the closest? Who talked the most, saw each other the most? Was I everyone’s least favorite? Would they even notice if I wasn’t there?

We were out of practice being together. The four of us hadn’t been in the same room in more than three years, not since Mae’s twenty-fourth birthday party. She’d held it at some überchic rooftop club. Molly and I had wedged ourselves in a corner and avoided mingling. We’d taken turns sipping tequila out of her flask because the bar was overpriced. I couldn’t afford it, and Molly held out on principle. She didn’t like places like that, where you got side-eye for wearing sneakers. When the tequila was gone, we acted like we were on a desert island and had just drunk the last of our water supply.

“I just want you to know,” she said, clutching my hands and fake crying, “you’re my best friend.”

“I wouldn’t want to dehydrate to death with anyone else!”

Mae scowled at us. Julie was busy flirting with a male model wearing an outfit I assumed to be couture but could have just as

The Return

easily been from Walmart. Camo cargo pants and a matching camo button up.

“Elise,” Molly said, tapping on the receiver to get my attention.

“Yeah?”

“What’s in your head?”

“I am excited. I just don’t know if it’s a good idea for Julie.”

“Well, Julie brought it up and Mae went into full Mae mode.”

Mae was the default organizer for all events. It satiated her type A personality. Knowing Mae, I assumed she was desperate to orchestrate pretty new memories to eclipse the trauma of the past two years. It was her coping mechanism—tying ribbons over open wounds.

“And you’re on board?” I asked.

“I don’t know, man. I said I’d go to Maine, but Jules wasn’t having it. We need to see her. If it’s on her terms, whatever. I mean, she seems fine. But if she’s not fine, we need the chance to be with her and see what’s up.”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like this is what she wants. What’s the alternative? We just show up at her house? I don’t know what else to do here, Lise.”

“How are you feeling about all this?” I asked her.

She did a sigh-laugh combo. “How are you supposed to feel when your friend comes back from the dead?”

“What’s your therapist say?”

“Don’t be a bitch.”

“I’m not! I’m genuinely curious.”

“She says I need to practice acceptance. Accept every thought I have about her coming back, even the bad ones. Acknowledge them, accept them, but not to hold on to them. Not to get stuck on the questions.”

“Sounds smart. Solid advice.”

“Only problem is, I have a lot of fucking questions.” She delivered it like a punch line, but I could hear in her voice she was having a hard time with Julie’s return.

“Molls.”

“I can’t wrap my mind around it. It’s too much. Too big a thing. We buried her, essentially. I buried her. We had a funeral.”

I remembered Molly’s long, wide-legged black pants. Her flowy blouse. She had looked like a seventies icon in mourning. I’d never seen her dressed up like that. I remembered her quiet pearlescent tears, the used tissues packed inside her fists like snowballs.

“I don’t want it to come across like I’m not happy. You know I am. This is miracle shit. But I don’t know what to do with that.”

“You don’t have to explain to me, Molly.”

“I do, though. You never grieved.”

“I did,” I said. A lie. “In my own way.”

“If you say so.”

“It was different. I held on to hope. I don’t think you guys did.”

“No,” she said, “we didn’t. You know. I told you from the minute I heard she was missing, I felt in my gut she was gone.”

“You just don’t like being wrong.”

“I’m going to reach through this phone and slap your beautiful face.”

“I’m glad that’s not possible. You’re freakishly strong.”

“Live strong,” she said. Molly was queen of the sarcastic cancer comment. “All right. So are you good with this?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

“It’s not just the Julie of it all. I’m poor.”

“I don’t think it’s expensive,” she said. She didn’t sound con-

The Return

vinced. She knew as well as I did that money wasn't an issue for Mae and that she was incapable of understanding it was for other people.

"How did Mae find the place?"

"She was there for a photo shoot a few months ago."

"We talking *Vogue* or . . . ?"

"Lise."

"Never mind," I said. "I don't want to ruin everyone's hopes and dreams."

"We'll work it out," she said.

"Do we have a date in mind?"

"Columbus Day weekend, I think."

"All right."

"I've got to go. Mae will iron out the details, and we'll take it from there," she said. She didn't sound excited, either.

"Okay, talk to you soon."

"Later, baby."

It wasn't that I didn't want to see them. I did. It was the dread. It moved under my skin like a sickness. It spread. I could feel it, always, as it manifested as a pinch in my throat when I swallowed or a slight ache in my neck, a migraine, a random sneezing fit, buckling knees. A range of symptoms that came and went, that had no intelligible connection, that persisted despite medication and heating pads and stretching and herbal tea. Something was wrong with me, physically, every day. It could be a different thing or the same. It could last for a few days or a week or two before switching to something else.

It was psychosomatic. I wasn't beyond admitting that. It was my mind's way of reminding me of my dread, of locking me inside it. I couldn't be happy or free or excited about anything. I was in constant discomfort.

Rachel Harrison

I went to see a doctor who took my blood and chastised me for smoking and for my erratic eating habits.

“It’ll catch up with you,” he warned.

“I know,” I snapped back. I didn’t like his condescending tone. “I know smoking is bad, and I need to eat more green things.”

“You should think about quitting.”

“I have thought about it.”

He didn’t care for my tone, either.

“I haven’t been sleeping,” I said, hoping for a prescription. I got one. He wanted to get rid of me.

“Thank you,” I said.

He said, “I need you to quit smoking.”

I left cranky. I chain-smoked on the way to the pharmacy. It gave me a headache and made me dizzy. I took one of the pills, went to bed too early, woke up too late. I considered the extra sleep a victory.

I made myself chocolate chip pancakes and ate them standing at the counter. I had dried chocolate on my cuticles. I remember noticing it when I picked up Mae’s call.

“How are you?”

“Good. You?”

“I’m crazed for Fashion Week,” she said. “But I want to book our rooms as soon as possible.”

She was out of breath and there were sirens wailing in the background, horns squawking, people yelling.

“Rooms?”

“This hotel is amazing, Lise. When I went for the shoot, I was thinking about how perfect it would be for a girls’ trip, but I thought it could never happen because of Julie. Now she’s back and it’s just . . . I don’t know. It’s like fate.”

“Fate?”

The Return

“Yes,” she said, resolute.

“When are we going?”

“Over Columbus Day weekend. We’ll get there that Thursday before and stay through Tuesday. Five nights. But we’ll only have to take off three days because of the holiday.”

“I don’t get Columbus Day.”

“What?”

“I don’t get it. I’ll have to take four days.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Don’t think so.”

“I’ll e-mail you and Molly the info.”

“What about Jules?”

“She has the dates. I’ll book her room.”

“What do you mean, ‘book her room’? We’re not sharing?”

“The whole point of this place is to get different rooms. The rooms are themed.”

“Oh.”

“It’s reasonable, Lise. Don’t worry. If you need, I can help.”

“I don’t need charity.”

She huffed. “That’s not what I said. This hotel was my pick. If it’s too much for you, I can help. It’s not a big deal, okay?”

“I can pay for my own room.”

“All right. I’ll send you the link. Or should I book them and then you can get me back?”

“Whatever works for you.”

“Okay, I’ll book them.”

I figured it was better to commit before I saw how much it would cost me. If I saw the number first, I would back out. Or cave and take the help. It was best to get the bill and deal with it once it was already set. Mae was going to do what she wanted, Julie and Molly

Rachel Harrison

would go along with it, and if I was the only one with a problem, I would be the only one to blame. Solidify my status as the least favorite, the most problematic. Killjoy extraordinaire.

Later, Mae sent me the link to the hotel and a number that made me clutch my chest like I'd been delivered bad news in an old movie. I cried myself to sleep over that number and the realization that the gap between my friends and me had grown so wide that soon I wouldn't be able to jump the distance. It hurt. It was bad enough to be poor and unsuccessful, to make half of what they did, but to know they knew it and weren't sensitive to it? That made it all so much worse.

Resentment began to take shape.

This trip would be the last time I would tolerate it. In the years I'd been in Buffalo, no one had come to see me. Not once. They had the means. They found other excuses. I understood that where I'd ended up was far less glamorous than where they had, but it shouldn't have mattered. The fact that it did told me something about them I didn't want to hear.

I sent Mae half the money right then to get it over with, get it off me. Flick it away like a bug on a picnic blanket. I would need to live on peanut butter sandwiches for the next month to pay the rest.

I was too mad and too sick over it to click the link and check out the hotel.

The trip was jeopardized in late August when Julie's estranged sister, Jade, decided to resurface.

"My sister is a problem" was a phrase I was familiar with. Julie never went into detail, but what I pieced together was a story of a turbulent childhood that Jade remembered much better than Julie

The Return

did. Jade had taken an early interest in boys, and she'd had a rebellious streak, a penchant for opiates. She dropped out of high school her senior year. She lived with a string of deadbeat boyfriends who had long hair or bad tattoos or missing teeth or arrest warrants or, usually, all of the above. One left her to die after she overdosed. A friend called the ambulance. One beat her up so badly she decided she'd had enough and wanted to get clean. That didn't last.

When their mother got sick, Jade couldn't be bothered. She was curious about the will, but her curiosity condemned her. She was written out of it. Julie got everything.

"I don't feel bad," Julie told me back when it happened. "She would spend it on drugs."

"Have you thought about trying to get her back into treatment?"

"You think I'm heartless," she said.

"I don't." I did. A little.

"You've never dealt with an addict. They lie. My sister is a compulsive liar. She's terrible at it, too."

"You could tell her she'll get the money if she goes to rehab. As motivation."

"Elise, would you just believe me?"

"All right. I do."

"I know she's my sister, my blood. But she's not my family. Not like you and Molls and Maeby baby. You're my family."

"You're closer to the situation. I trust your judgment."

Watching Jade pop her gum during her big TV interview, I realized Julie had a point. Jade looked twice her age, but young, too, somehow. It was her eyes, wide and desperate. Her eyebrows were overplucked, or they'd fallen out. She'd drawn them back on with what appeared to be black Sharpie. Her teeth were brown. Her jaw squarish, her face long. She didn't look anything like Julie.

Rachel Harrison

“She went away because she took all my mom’s money after she died,” Jade said. “When my mom was sick, she was hanging around, waiting to get that money. She took it all, turned our mom against me. She knew I was coming for her, ’cause it was my money, too. I had a right to that money. So she went away.”

“Where do you think she was?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. But she’s lying if she says she can’t remember. She knows. She did it on purpose. She’s the world’s biggest manipulator. You can’t believe a word she says.”

“Do you think her husband knew?”

Jade shrugged. “Never met him. But Julie can get people to do things. She shows them this sweet side, but it’s not the real Julie.”

“Do you think you’ll see your sister?”

“Nah. But people should know about her. What a liar she is. It’s a fake story.”

It was obvious Jade had done the interview for money, to get on TV, whatever, but it didn’t matter. It poisoned the public with suspicion. Julie was no longer a miracle case. No longer a sweet, beautiful young wife who had vanished on a hike. She was a schemer. A manipulator. Someone who would cheat her ailing sister out of her inheritance. Someone who would invent an elaborate two-year-disappearance plot.

“Have you seen?” Julie asked. It was one a.m., but I was up anyway, pacing around my apartment, trying to exhaust myself to sleep without any pharmaceutical assistance.

I decided my best course of action was to lie and say, “Seen what?”

“It’s Jade.”

“What happened?”

“She called me a liar on TV.”

She said it with the moderate annoyance of someone who got a

Rachel Harrison

“She went away because she took all my mom’s money after she died,” Jade said. “When my mom was sick, she was hanging around, waiting to get that money. She took it all, turned our mom against me. She knew I was coming for her, ’cause it was my money, too. I had a right to that money. So she went away.”

“Where do you think she was?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. But she’s lying if she says she can’t remember. She knows. She did it on purpose. She’s the world’s biggest manipulator. You can’t believe a word she says.”

“Do you think her husband knew?”

Jade shrugged. “Never met him. But Julie can get people to do things. She shows them this sweet side, but it’s not the real Julie.”

“Do you think you’ll see your sister?”

“Nah. But people should know about her. What a liar she is. It’s a fake story.”

It was obvious Jade had done the interview for money, to get on TV, whatever, but it didn’t matter. It poisoned the public with suspicion. Julie was no longer a miracle case. No longer a sweet, beautiful young wife who had vanished on a hike. She was a schemer. A manipulator. Someone who would cheat her ailing sister out of her inheritance. Someone who would invent an elaborate two-year-disappearance plot.

“Have you seen?” Julie asked. It was one a.m., but I was up anyway, pacing around my apartment, trying to exhaust myself to sleep without any pharmaceutical assistance.

I decided my best course of action was to lie and say, “Seen what?”

“It’s Jade.”

“What happened?”

“She called me a liar on TV.”

She said it with the moderate annoyance of someone who got a

The Return

flat tire or who was taking out the trash and the bag ripped. She wasn't hysterical like I expected, which was strange, considering I'd known her to be obsessed with her public image.

"No one will believe her," I said. "How does she look?"

"Not good."

"Do you feel like you need to give a statement or something?"

"I don't know," she said. "What do you think?"

"Maybe. So people's minds don't run away." I settled on my bed, lying back with my legs up the wall.

My studio was a narrow rectangle, the kitchen on one side, designated bedroom area on the other. My bed was positioned in the back corner, below the only window in the apartment. I lived on the ground floor and kept the curtains drawn 95 percent of the time. I hated the idea of someone looking in on me. Hated it more than I valued the natural light.

I set my gaze up to the window and noticed there was a gap between the curtains. Almost wide enough for a face. A set of eyes. A nose, a mouth. I tried not to let it bother me. It was late; no one would be passing by. But I couldn't shake the feeling that, at any second, a strange face would appear in that space on the other side of the glass.

I sat up and closed the gap.

"Elise?"

"I'm here."

"You sound different."

"I'm fine," I said. "A little anxious. I've been having trouble sleeping."

"We must have traded," she said. "I used to be an insomniac, but lately I sleep like a baby."

"That's good," I said, nibbling on an already stubby nail. "Good you're getting sleep."

Rachel Harrison

“You get pills?”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to have to take them every night.”

“Are you not supposed to?”

“Dunno.”

“I should let you go. I’ll call you in the morning. You seem distracted.”

“I’m not. Talk to me. Talk, talk, talk.”

“Okay, so, if I give a statement, it makes me look guilty. I don’t want to be defensive.”

“I don’t think it’ll come across that way. You have the right to protect your reputation.”

“My reputation?” she said. “My reputation as the missing newlywed?”

“That’s not your reputation.”

“Level with me, Lise.”

“I told you before. This is temporary. You’ll get back to your life.”

“What life?”

I sat on the edge of my tub and lit a cigarette. I tried not to make a habit of smoking inside but kept a loose definition of what constituted a habit.

“What’s going on?” I asked her, tapping ashes into an empty soap dish.

“Nothing,” she said. “Readjusting. I don’t know if I’m ready for a girls’ weekend at some kitschy hotel.”

“No?” My ribs clenched. I missed her. I wanted to see her. I also didn’t want to pay all this money for a contrived experience. All I really wanted was Jules and me on the couch eating Nutella with spoons and waxing poetic about reality TV.

But there were Molly and Mae. And the money I had already spent.

The Return

“I want to go. I really do,” she said. “But I’m afraid to leave. Not only because of the media stuff, but because what if I lose my memory again? It’s stupid, but sometimes I’m afraid to leave a room because what if I’m never seen again? Poor Tristan—he follows me around the house. I know he’s worried about the same thing. If I don’t know what happened, how do I know it won’t happen again?”

I didn’t know what to say. I watched the ember burn steadily toward the filter, my fingers.

“Don’t listen to me,” Julie said, breaking the long silence. “I’m just in a mood because of this whole Jade thing.”

“It’ll blow over,” I said.

“I want to see you,” she said, “and Molly and Mae.”

“It’s going to be good for you. For all of us,” I said, sounding more confident than I felt.

“The hotel does look cool, doesn’t it? It’ll be fun to take pictures.”

My curiosity won out. I abandoned the bathroom for my kitchen, stood at the counter, opened my laptop and searched.

As I scrolled through the photos, I convinced myself that everything would be fine, that we would have a good time, that the trip was exactly what we needed. And it worked, because I had spent the past two years becoming very convincing.

The Return

flat tire or who was taking out the trash and the bag ripped. She wasn't hysterical like I expected, which was strange, considering I'd known her to be obsessed with her public image.

"No one will believe her," I said. "How does she look?"

"Not good."

"Do you feel like you need to give a statement or something?"

"I don't know," she said. "What do you think?"

"Maybe. So people's minds don't run away." I settled on my bed, lying back with my legs up the wall.

My studio was a narrow rectangle, the kitchen on one side, designated bedroom area on the other. My bed was positioned in the back corner, below the only window in the apartment. I lived on the ground floor and kept the curtains drawn 95 percent of the time. I hated the idea of someone looking in on me. Hated it more than I valued the natural light.

I set my gaze up to the window and noticed there was a gap between the curtains. Almost wide enough for a face. A set of eyes. A nose, a mouth. I tried not to let it bother me. It was late; no one would be passing by. But I couldn't shake the feeling that, at any second, a strange face would appear in that space on the other side of the glass.

I sat up and closed the gap.

"Elise?"

"I'm here."

"You sound different."

"I'm fine," I said. "A little anxious. I've been having trouble sleeping."

"We must have traded," she said. "I used to be an insomniac, but lately I sleep like a baby."

"That's good," I said, nibbling on an already stubby nail. "Good you're getting sleep."

Rachel Harrison

“You get pills?”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to have to take them every night.”

“Are you not supposed to?”

“Dunno.”

“I should let you go. I’ll call you in the morning. You seem distracted.”

“I’m not. Talk to me. Talk, talk, talk.”

“Okay, so, if I give a statement, it makes me look guilty. I don’t want to be defensive.”

“I don’t think it’ll come across that way. You have the right to protect your reputation.”

“My reputation?” she said. “My reputation as the missing newlywed?”

“That’s not your reputation.”

“Level with me, Lise.”

“I told you before. This is temporary. You’ll get back to your life.”

“What life?”

I sat on the edge of my tub and lit a cigarette. I tried not to make a habit of smoking inside but kept a loose definition of what constituted a habit.

“What’s going on?” I asked her, tapping ashes into an empty soap dish.

“Nothing,” she said. “Readjusting. I don’t know if I’m ready for a girls’ weekend at some kitschy hotel.”

“No?” My ribs clenched. I missed her. I wanted to see her. I also didn’t want to pay all this money for a contrived experience. All I really wanted was Jules and me on the couch eating Nutella with spoons and waxing poetic about reality TV.

But there were Molly and Mae. And the money I had already spent.

The Return

“I want to go. I really do,” she said. “But I’m afraid to leave. Not only because of the media stuff, but because what if I lose my memory again? It’s stupid, but sometimes I’m afraid to leave a room because what if I’m never seen again? Poor Tristan—he follows me around the house. I know he’s worried about the same thing. If I don’t know what happened, how do I know it won’t happen again?”

I didn’t know what to say. I watched the ember burn steadily toward the filter, my fingers.

“Don’t listen to me,” Julie said, breaking the long silence. “I’m just in a mood because of this whole Jade thing.”

“It’ll blow over,” I said.

“I want to see you,” she said, “and Molly and Mae.”

“It’s going to be good for you. For all of us,” I said, sounding more confident than I felt.

“The hotel does look cool, doesn’t it? It’ll be fun to take pictures.”

My curiosity won out. I abandoned the bathroom for my kitchen, stood at the counter, opened my laptop and searched.

As I scrolled through the photos, I convinced myself that everything would be fine, that we would have a good time, that the trip was exactly what we needed. And it worked, because I had spent the past two years becoming very convincing.

Read the rest now!