

THE
LIES
I TELL

A Novel

JULIE CLARK

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HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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

Hardback ISBN 978 1 529 38935 7
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 529 38931 9
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 38932 6

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

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

www.hodder.co.uk

KAT

Present—June

She stands across the room from me, in a small cluster of donors, talking and laughing. A jazz quartet plays in a corner, the bouncing, slipping notes dancing around us, a low undertone of class and money. *Meg Williams*. I take a sip of wine, savoring the expensive vintage, the weight of the crystal glass, and I watch her. There are few photographs of her in existence—a grainy senior portrait from an old high school yearbook, and another image pulled from a 2009 YMCA staff directory—but I recognized her immediately. My first thought: *She's back*. Followed closely by my second: *Finally*.

As soon as I saw her, I tucked my press credentials into my purse and kept to the perimeter of the room. I've been to all of Ron Ashton's campaign events in the past three months, watching and waiting for Meg to make her appearance—called there by a Google Alert I set ten years ago. After a decade of silence, it pinged in April, with the creation

of a new website. *Meg Williams, Real Estate Agent*. I always knew she'd return. That she'd done so under her real name told me she wasn't planning to hide.

And yet, when she entered, smiling as she handed over her coat at the door, my sense of equilibrium shifted, launching me into a moment I wasn't sure would ever arrive. You can prepare yourself for something, imagine it a hundred different ways, and still find yourself breathless when it actually happens.

I spoke to her once, ten years ago, though she wouldn't have known I was the one who'd answered the phone that day. It was a thirty-second call that changed the trajectory of my life, and to say I hold Meg partially responsible would be an understatement.

Scott, my fiancé, will surely argue that the cost—both financially and emotionally—will be too great. That we can't afford for me to step away from paying jobs to chase a story that might never happen. That immersing myself in that time, in those events, and in those people, might undo all the work I've put into healing. What he doesn't understand is that this is the story that will finally set me free—not just from the fluff pieces I'm paid pennies per word to write, but from the bigger demons that Meg sent me toward so long ago.

I attach myself to a larger circle of people, and I nod along with their conversation, all the while keeping an eye on her. Watching her mingle and circulate. Watching her watch him. I've spent hundreds of hours deconstructing her last few years in Los Angeles, and no matter which way I look at it, Ron Ashton stands at the center. While I don't know her heart—not yet at least—I do know she isn't the kind of woman to pass up an opportunity to balance the scales.

She tosses her head back and laughs at something someone says, and as Ron approaches her from behind, I marvel that I get to be here to see this moment. That I'm the only person in the room who knows what's about to happen.

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Well, not the only person. She knows.

I turn slightly so I appear to be looking out a large window, at the sweeping views from downtown to the ocean, and I watch as introductions are made. Witty banter, some laughter. He bends down so he can hear her better, and I wonder how she does it. How she can trick people into believing she is who she says she is, into handing over their deepest desires, opening themselves up to her manipulation and trickery. Offering themselves willingly to her deception.

I watch as a business card is passed and pocketed before looking away, my mind latching on to her entry point. Which will now become mine.

MEG

Present–June

Twenty-Two Weeks before the Election

It starts how it always starts.

With me, quietly slipping alongside you—no sudden moves, no loud fanfare. As if I’ve always been there. Always belonged.

This time, it’s a \$10,000-a-plate fundraiser. After nearly ten years, I feel right at home among the extravagant trappings of the rich—the original artwork on the walls, the antiques that cost more than most people make in a year, and the hired help I pretend not to notice, quietly moving through homes like this one, perched high on a hill with all of Los Angeles glittering below us.

If you’re one of my targets, know that I’ve chosen you carefully. It’s likely you’re in the midst of a major life change—a lost job, a divorce, the death of a close family member. Or a heated run for elected office that you’re on the verge of losing. Emotional people take risks. They

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don't think clearly, and they're eager to believe whatever fantasy I feed them.

Social media has become my primary research tool, with its check-ins, geo-tags, and shameless self-promotion. And those quizzes some of your friends take and share? Dogs or cats? Number of brothers and sisters? Most of the questions seem harmless, but the next time you see one, take a closer look. Name five places you've lived or Four names you go by—both of which allow me to approach you. *John? It's me, Meg! From Boise, remember? I knew your sister.*

It's so easy, it's criminal.

I spend hundreds of hours on observation and research. Profiling the different people in your life, finding the one I can befriend, the one who will lead me to you. When I'm done, I know everything I possibly can about you, and most of the people around you. By the time you're saying *nice to meet you*, I've already known you for months.

Does this worry you? It should.

"Have you tried the crab cakes?" Veronica appears at my elbow, a cocktail napkin in hand. We've become close in the six months I've been back in Los Angeles, having met in a yoga class in Santa Monica, our mats positioned next to each other in the back. What started as a friendly greeting with a stranger at the beginning of class was a budding friendship by the end. It's amazing how easy Instagram stories make it to put yourself in the right place at the right time, next to the right person.

"I haven't," I tell her. "I heard they're serving filet mignon for dinner, so I'm saving myself for that."

There's a heat inside my chest, the slow burn of excitement I always get when I start a new job. I enjoy this part the most I think, the setting of the hook. Savoring the delicious anticipation of what's about to

happen. No matter how many times I do this, I never tire of the thrill this moment always brings.

Veronica crumples her napkin. “You’re missing out, Meg.”

It’s still a shock to hear people use my real name. I’ve gone by many over the years, mostly variations of my own—Margaret, Melody, Maggie. Backstories that range from college student to freelance photographer and most recently interior decorator and life coach to celebrities, all of them elaborate fabrications. Roles I played to near perfection. But tonight, I’m here as myself, someone I haven’t been for a very long time.

I’d had no choice in the matter. My entry into this job required me to get my real estate license, and there was no getting around the social security number and fingerprinting. But that’s okay, because this time I want my name to be known. For Ron Ashton—developer, local politician, and candidate for state senator—to know it was me who took everything from him. Not just his money, but the reputation he’s spent years cultivating.

I see him across the room, his broad shoulders a few inches above everyone else’s, his gray hair neatly combed, talking to Veronica’s husband, his campaign manager.

Veronica follows my gaze and says, “David says the election is going to be close. That Ron can’t afford a single misstep in these last few months.”

“What’s he like?” I ask. “Between us.”

Veronica thinks for a moment and says, “Your typical politician. Closet womanizer. Fancies himself to be Reagan reincarnated. David says he’s obsessed with him. ‘He won’t shut up about fucking Reagan.’” She gives a small laugh and shakes her head.

“But what do *you* think?”

She looks at me with an amused expression. “I think he’s like every other politician out there—pathologically ambitious. But he pays David well, and the fringe benefits are great.” Then she nudges my shoulder.

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“I’m glad you could come. I think there’ll be quite a few people here who will be good for you to meet. Possibly some new clients.”

I take another sip of wine. My whole reason for being here tonight is to snag one client in particular. “I could use the business,” I say. “It’s been hard starting over.”

“You’ll get there. You’ve got years of experience in Michigan behind you. I mean, the way you handled our purchase of the Eightieth Street property. I still don’t know how you got the sellers to drop their price like that.”

I suppress a smile. Shortly after we’d met, Veronica had mentioned over post-yoga sushi that they were looking for an investment property, but the agent they were using wasn’t finding them anything in their price range.

“Did she show you that property on Kelton?” I had riffed, knowing exactly what they were hoping to find. “The one-story traditional that was on the market for \$1.7 million?”

Veronica’s eyes had widened. “No, and that would have been perfect. I should ask her about it.”

“It sold in multiples the day it hit the market, so it’s too late,” I said. “Your agent works out of Apex Realty in Brentwood, right? We’re always getting internal email alerts announcing her deals—ten million, twenty million.” I took a piece of sushi and held it between my chopsticks. “I can tell you, managing escrows at that price point can be consuming.”

My story was that I’d moved home to Los Angeles after a successful career selling real estate in Ann Arbor. My new website links to another one in Michigan, featuring listings pilfered from Zillow and Redfin.

Veronica had set her chopsticks down and said, “She was great when we purchased the Malibu house, but maybe this price point is beneath her.” I took a sip of my lemon water and let Veronica spin this out in her mind. Finally, she’d said, “I’d love to throw you the business. Maybe you can put your feelers out, see what you can find.”

I'd found them something almost immediately. A single-story traditional in Westchester on a tree-lined street. Hardwood floors, a bay window, and a fully remodeled kitchen. When I handed Veronica the listing setup, outlining the house's features and price, she'd balked. "This is nearly \$500,000 above our maximum budget."

In another lifetime, I'd once taken classes toward a digital design degree. I still have the certificate of completion tucked in a box, somewhere in storage. Granted, it's a forgery, but I'd learned enough to get by in the beginning, and even more in the years since.

"I think I can get them down significantly. Let's just take a look and see what we think. It's on lockbox, so we can go now if we want."

The listing I'd handed her was mostly accurate—bedrooms, square footage, HVAC; I'd only inflated the price. From there, I'd proceeded to "negotiate down" to just over \$200,000 above the actual list price.

This only worked because apps like Zillow and Redfin don't exist for people like Veronica and David. In their tax bracket, no one does anything that can be outsourced. Accountants and bookkeepers who pay their bills. Maids and housekeepers to do their grocery shopping and cook their meals. And a trusted real estate agent to do the searches, coordinate with the listing agent to preview properties, set up private showings, and manage the transaction for them.

David and Veronica signed paperwork when I asked them to, wired the funds where I told them to, and if they ever noticed they'd never met the listing agent or sellers, it was a fleeting thought and then it was gone again.

In the end, David had proclaimed it the easiest transaction he'd ever done. Why wouldn't it be, when everyone got exactly what they wanted? The sellers got \$200,000 over the real asking price. Veronica and David felt like they got the deal of the century, thanks to the one I'd fabricated. And I got a shiny—and ironclad—reputation within their circle of friends.

The main element of a good con is a strong thread of legitimacy. Of

almost being who you say you are. Just like on a movie set, I'm real. My actions are real. It's only the background that's fake.

David joins us now, wrapping his arm around Veronica's waist. "Meg, you look gorgeous," he says. "I hope my wife hasn't been boring you with details of the remodel?"

I force a smile. "Not at all," I say. "We were actually just talking about Ron. I hear the election is going to be close?"

David nods. "Our internal polls show them nearly tied. Tonight's fundraising will go a long way toward our final push."

"You must be exhausted," I say. "Veronica tells me you're never home."

David winks at Veronica. "Sounds like the two of you have been getting into some good trouble in my absence. Thanks for keeping her busy."

"It's been my pleasure."

When the conversation turns toward their annual winter vacation to the Caribbean, I tune them out and watch the crowd of people mingle and mix, small clusters forming and then re-forming into new configurations as the quartet in the corner launches into a new rhythm. Los Angeles is so different from Pennsylvania, where I'd been last. I've had to make a steep adjustment, softening my approach, making sure all my edges match who I say I am. Here, people are naturally wary, looking for the angle, the hitch, the trick. It's expected that no one you meet is exactly who they say they are.

I work hard to embed myself into other people's circle of friends, so that no one notices that I don't have any of my own. I haven't had a true friend in years, not since before I left Los Angeles. I try not to think of Cal, or wonder where he is, whether he's still with Robert. I have very few regrets in my life, but how things ended with Cal is one of them.

A tendril of anxiety winds its way through me as I think through my timeline once more. Unlike my past jobs, this one has an expiration

date—fourteen days before Election Day. Which leaves me twenty weeks. One hundred forty days. It sounds like a lot, but there will be very little room for mistakes or delays. There are specific benchmarks I'll need to meet along the way in order for everything to work. The first of which is an introduction to Ron, and that has to happen tonight.

As part of my background research, I've dipped into Ron's real estate portfolio, searching public records to get a feel for how much he's got in equity and how much he's leveraged. Thanks to his run for office, I've been able to look through his taxes as well. One thing that stood out was how many financial risks he's taken and how many of them played out to his advantage. I think back to how he tricked my mother, robbed us both of what was rightfully ours, and I wonder how many others Ron has used and then discarded on his path to state senator.

"Meg, help us out. Saint John or Saint Croix?" Veronica's eyes are pleading.

I know she's been angling for Saint Croix, so I say, "The last time I was in Saint John was about three years ago." I shake my head as if saddened by the memory. "As much as I love that island, I was really disappointed. You stay at the Villas, right?"

David nods. "They've always taken really good care of us."

I wrinkle my nose in distaste. "I think they've unionized. Definitely not the experience I was hoping for."

"Jesus," he says. "Saint Croix it is then."

Veronica gives a tiny clap and says, "I don't know why you never listen to me."

A voice from behind cuts into our conversation. "I hope you three are discussing my victory party." I turn and find myself face-to-face with Ron Ashton, the man who tore my life apart, sending my mother into a downward spiral she never recovered from and leaving me to live alone in a car for my final year of high school and beyond.

I smile. "The man of the hour," I say, holding out my hand. "Meg

Williams.” A small part of me thrills, knowing that what I’m offering him is the absolute truth. I’ve spent years imagining this moment, wondering if he’d recognize me or my last name. See the shadow of my mother’s features in mine. Wondering if I’d have to pivot and turn our meeting into a happy reunion, a coincidence of naivete and sexual innuendo. Enough to glide over the bump of our prior connection and convince him I knew nothing then, and know even less now. But his expression is blank, and I’m relieved to remain anonymous.

His grip is warm and firm, and I hold it just a fraction of a second longer than is typical, until I see a flash of interest behind his eyes. He will remember this moment. Come back to it again in his mind, and ask himself if he could have made a different decision. My job is to make sure the answer to that question is *no*.

“Meg has just moved to Los Angeles from Michigan,” Veronica offers. “She was the one who got us that stellar deal on the Westchester property.”

Ron’s interest deepens, as I knew it would. According to Ron’s social media accounts, he’s been working with the same real estate agent for nearly fifteen years. A man who had two complaints for sexual harassment to the California Realtors board. It had been easy enough to become his third and final one, leaving Ron Ashton without representation for nearly four months now. For a developer, that’s a problem.

“Real estate,” he says. “What’s your sales record like?”

“In Michigan, I was in the top one percent for the last ten years,” I tell him. “But here in Los Angeles? It’s slow going.” It’s always good to infuse a shade of humility. People appreciate knowing they’re better than you.

“Do you have a card?” he asks. “I might give you a call.”

I pull one out of my clutch and hand it to him. “Check out my website. Even though I’m newly arrived in town, I’m not new to the business, and I know Los Angeles well. I’d be happy to chat if you’re

interested.” Then I turn to Veronica and say, “In Saint Croix, you absolutely need to eat at The Riverhead.”

As Veronica begins to outline their itinerary, I feel it, a tingle on the back of my neck that I learned long ago never to ignore. I take a small step backward and look down to my left, as if I’m trying to make sure I don’t misstep. When I look up, I sweep my gaze across the room searching for someone who might be watching me, but all I see is a room full of people talking and laughing, drinking and celebrating a man they’re hoping to send to Sacramento.

I smile and nod at Veronica, but I’m no longer listening. I’m running through my arrival, the people I spoke to—the valet, the campaign staff covering the front entry, various donors. Harmless small talk necessary for a new-to-town real estate agent trying to build her client base. All of them are accounted for, all of them are occupied. Perhaps it’s just the familiarity of being back in Los Angeles. The air here is unique, a blend of grass and car exhaust, and sometimes, if you’re close enough, the smell of salt on an ocean breeze. I’m far away from where I grew up, but beneath all the layers—all the identities I’ve held, the years that have passed—I’m still the person I was when I left. A woman on the run, flush with the power of knowing I could become anyone. Do anything. All I had to do was tell a man what he wanted to hear.