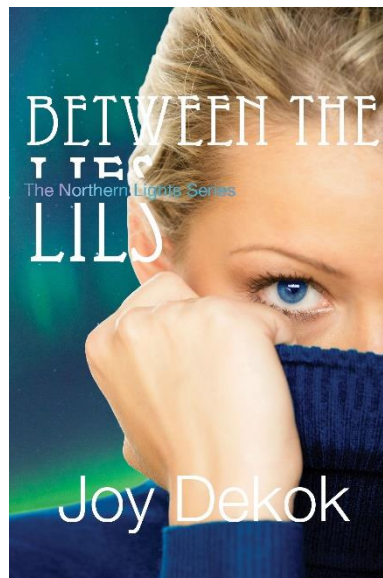


Between the Lies

Book 1: The Northern Lights Series

Joy DeKok



BETWEEN THE LIES

PROLOGUE

I needed a mother-daughter talk. The heavy dew on the grass sparkled in the early morning sun. I could almost hear her lilting voice say, “Mommy! Look at all the diamonds.”

I wondered where the caretaker was, certain he was watching over his kingdom, protective of every grave and visitor.

I greeted my daughter, Jillian, by tracing her name etched into the granite stone and whispering, “Hi, Baby Girl.”

I didn’t expect an answer; I knew she was gone—her soul too pure and lovely to be held captive by anything earthly. If there was a heaven, she was delighting whatever deity lived there.

“Look what I brought you.” I held the two dozen Shasta daisies and one dozen sunflowers in front of her headstone before placing the bouquets in the vases on both sides of the cement base.

“Morning, Miss Olivia.” Deacon’s voice scratched across the

BETWEEN THE LIES

still air.

“Hi, Deacon,” I greeted the caretaker. I knew his wife had died, but his striped overalls and white cotton shirt looked freshly pressed. Deacon’s burgundy tie was knotted and in place. His bald head looked polished, and he always removed his beat-up Twins baseball cap when a lady was present. As a younger woman, I might have laughed at his old-fashioned ways, but in this place, I appreciated his gentle manners.

We’d met when I returned to Jillian after her funeral luncheon five years earlier. The weathered man was there, gently raking the earth smoothly over her. He introduced himself and asked, “You want to help me tuck her in?”

I’d stepped out of my high heels, and took the other rake he offered me. Before I knew it, the front of my designer dress was damp and muddy—a mix of my tears, sweat, and dirt. The old man seemed to understand; I wanted to do one more thing for my little girl. This strange act quieted some of the chaos in my mind.

When we were done, he poured some water into a white cotton handkerchief and handed it to me. He repeated the process in another one, and wiped it over his face and neck. I copied him. Then I noticed his cheeks were wet again.

“You didn’t know her. Why are you crying?” I asked.

“Two of our babies rest beside my Ella over that way. I know a little about your pain.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Deacon.”

“Me too, Missy. And, I’m sorry for yours. I promise to take care of your daughter for as long as God gives me the strength.”

His soft words rattled in the dry, hollow place in my heart then collided with my disbelief.

My face tensed as I said, “Please do not speak to me about God. Ever.”

His eyes filled with tears again, and he said, “Then, we aren’t going to talk. He’s the best part of me, and I talk about Him the way other folks do their favorite people.”

BETWEEN THE LIES

Not wanting to jeopardize my daughter's care, I said through clenched teeth, "Fine. You go ahead and talk about Him, but don't expect me to believe in Him. And don't try to convince me either. Got it?"

He nodded, took off his gardening glove, and offered me his hand. "Okay. Unless, of course, you ask me about Him."

I shook his hand to seal the deal. *When pigs fly.*

Changing the subject I asked, "Why the white shirt and tie?"

"Well, I was a preacher for a while and never got over dressing for the people I care for. The overalls are required. This is my way of showing the folks who visit here my respect for them and their loved ones. Now that I'm doing my own laundry, I sure do appreciate my wife more. Washing the sweat and grime out of my shirts is almost as much work as pulling the weeds from around these stones. Even when she got sick, my Ella never complained."

"Jillian was the same way. I don't know how that was possible. She said God helped her. She really believed in Him . . . for all the good it did her."

"Well, I'll let you get back to your visit with your daughter. I hope to see you again soon."

I didn't care he knew I was an atheist, but I didn't want him thinking I was also crazy, so I said, "Mr. Deacon, I know she can't hear me. These talks are all one-sided."

His rich chuckle rippled its way across my heart. "I understand. I do the best I can to schedule my lunch hour by those graves on the other side of that pine tree. I tell those three everything. And you can call me Deacon, everyone does." His grin gave me a glimpse into the little boy he once was.

"Okay. Deacon, would you mind if next time I come I bring something to sit on?"

His grin widened into a smile. "Missy, I thought you'd never ask." He pulled a lawn chair from behind the seats of his golf cart, and opened it up for me. "You leave it here when you're done; I'll pick it up later."

BETWEEN THE LIES

From that day on, moments after I reached Jillian's stone, I'd hear the soft hum of Deacon's electric golf cart on its way to me. That day was no exception.

"Morning, Missy.

For some reason, I treasured his nickname for me, which is strange. I was easily irked when it came to stuff like this. At least since I'd met Alan. Nicknames and terms of endearment were forbidden.

"How do you always know I'm here?"

"I see you drive in."

"You sure do keep a close watch on this place."

"It's part of my job, and it's so flat here I can see the entrance from anywhere. It's nice because I can bring our visitors the things they might want to make them more comfortable. Here's a chair and a bottle of water for your flowers."

As Deacon returned to his duties, I placed the chair he'd handed me near her stone and sat leaning forward. I had so much to tell her.

"Baby, I can hardly believe it; your daddy is going to come and hear me speak at the Kids Fighting Cancer fundraiser. He's always generous and so is his family, but he's never attended."

I took a breath, realizing my whispers sounded like a giddy teenager sharing a big secret with her best friend. I couldn't stop myself.

"Several of us moms are going to tell our stories, and we decided to wear evening gowns. Mine is red. Honey, you would love it. There are sequins and pearls across the bodice and hem. I'm going to wear my hair up, just like a princess. That surprises me more than your daddy coming. You know this girly-girl stuff isn't like me. I'm trying not to get too excited, but I have this feeling something big is about to happen between the two of us. He's never said he'd leave Michelle, and I've always accepted my place in his life, it's just that he's never acknowledged me this way before. This could be *it*; the moment he claims me as his own."

BETWEEN THE LIES

I sat quietly for a little while, remembering. I'd worn red the night I met him. In my mind, it was our color.

"Jillian, the only ones who have loved me openly were my granny, Pete, and you. I've always been what my mother would call a 'kept' woman—a dirty secret in a rich man's life. And before that, Gus. Well, you don't need to know about him, but I can't help but ask myself what it would be like to be the legitimate woman in Alan's life."

An excited giggle slipped out of my mouth. I pulled the petals off one of the daisies I'd brought her, silently playing, *he loves me; he loves me not*. About halfway through the blossom, my phone alarm reminded me it was time to leave. Glad my petal picking ended on *he loves me*, and excited about my errands, I told Jillian, "I've got to pick up my dress, but I'll be back soon to tell you all about it. I wish you were here so you could cross your fingers for me the way my little sister used to. If you have any influence where you are, maybe you could ask the angels to put in a good word for me."

As always, about halfway back to my car, I turned, blew her a kiss, and waved. The flowers in her vases gently nodded in the breeze. The beauty of the moment brought a fresh run of tears. I looked heavenward, almost believing.

A man who looked like the homeless guys I'd seen on street corners stepped out from behind a tree and interrupted the moment. He looked at Jillian's grave and then at me. I couldn't see his eyes, but something dangerous emanated from him.

I stepped back just as I heard Deacon headed our way in his cart. The stranger turned and walked away. My daughter's keeper folded up the chair and then tipped the bill of his worn baseball cap in my direction. I wondered if Deacon was Jillian's guardian angel or mine.

In the quiet of my car, I reminded myself, "The dead don't need guardian angels, and if they are real, only the good among the living get them."

BETWEEN THE LIES

Gus told me I'd been bad from before my birth. It was hard to believe a baby could be so terrible, but he assured me every molecule in me was evil. Maybe that's what I'd recognized in the dirty wanderer who now watched me partially hidden behind a tree. Red-hot anger caused an ache in my throat. Was I so bad even my visits with Jillian had to be ruined by a stranger and bad memories?

I started my car and pulled forward. Leaving was always the hardest part.

The grungy guy stepped onto the driveway in front of me. I applied the brakes. He didn't look at me as he crossed, but every time he put one foot in front of the other, it felt like a step across my soul.

After he was safely across, I gunned the engine, and turned the radio to my favorite oldies station. The Hollies sang, *Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress*. So what if mine was red; the heavy, sensual beat of the song eased the fear away. Michelle's reign was over. It was my turn.

CHAPTER 1

I was ready for my Cinderella night. I had the dress, the hair-do, and a pair of shoes that looked like glass slippers but were carefully crafted soft, clear plastic decorated with rhinestones. All of us moms were wearing them. Janni, the leader of this pack had princess in her DNA, and had talked us into wearing the fancy dresses with her. She, of course, would also be wearing a tiara.

She'd used a photograph of all of us in all the promos, including on a billboard by the Mall of America, and it worked. Pre-party donations increased one hundred percent the first day it was up. From then on I was a committed princess mommy. I looked at my bare wrists and wished I had Ma's rhinestone bracelet, but stopped the thought before it could ruin my evening. There were just some places I never wanted to go again.

Security called to let me know the private elevator was out-of-order, and I was told to use the public elevator. That had never happened in the ten years I'd lived there, but then neither had the night ahead of me.

A black stretch limo waited at the curb to take me to the ball. And I did it all without a fairy god-mother. Who needed a fat little old lady with a wand and a warning? Not me. No way.

Not until I found the dead guy anyway.

Lloyd, the building security guy, called to tell me my ride was waiting. When the elevator doors whispered open, I stepped in with a practiced little swish. I say practiced, because I had taken

BETWEEN THE LIES

three trial runs and added what I thought might be an elegant little entrance move.

The guy in the elevator didn't notice. He stood in the corner with his chin on his chest and his eyes half-closed and with a Twins cap sitting off-kilter on his head. *What a stiff.*

When the doors shut, our descent began with a slight shudder, and the man lurched forward and fell face-down near my feet.

"For crying out loud, man, it's too early to be so drunk," I muttered.

When the doors opened, I called out to the head of security who was seated at the front desk, "Can you help me with this guy?"

Lloyd, a former marine, rolled the man over, then jumped back. "Olivia, this man is dead."

I gasped and stared at the guy and noticed his eyes were empty—devoid of life. His face, neck, and scalp were severely scarred. His cap now lay on the floor beside him. I assumed he used it to cover his face which looked tight and melted.

Instead of screaming or fleeing I went to my secret place; the one deep inside me I'd discovered the first time my father came to my room. I hadn't been there in a long time, but I let the calm flow over me as I shut the door to my feelings. Besides, I had someplace to be, and losing it was not an option.

"Lloyd, I have to get going. You can handle this, right?"

"No. You are a witness and may have evidence on your dress or the bottom of your shoes."

"Can you please get me out of here?" The body was blocking my exit, had ruined my elegant entrance into the foyer of the building, and was going to make me late for the evening.

Lloyd raised his hand as I tried to explain why I had to get out. He was already on his cell phone, telling someone Mr. Lyons would not appreciate it if the St. Paul police department didn't send someone over "pronto." When he hung up he looked at me and said, "Stay put." He left no room for argument so I stayed with

BETWEEN THE LIES

the guy. The very dead guy.

Within minutes, a swarm of police and other officials had the area cordoned off with yellow tape, and hustled around like bees in a hive. At first glance, it seemed chaotic, but their movements were strategically choreographed.

And there was a coroner. I'd always pictured people who work with the dead all looking like old Dr. Frankenstein: gaunt and grisly. This guy was movie-star handsome. "Hello. I need your corner." His voice sounded so warm it could melt an iceberg. "Would you mind stepping onto these slightly sticky sheets of paper? They will catch any particles from your shoes we might need." He offered me his hand and helped me step over the dead guy onto large sheets he placed on the elevator floor.

I have no idea what came over me, but I heard myself say, "Thank you, kind sir," and I curtsied. Maybe it was the dress.

Whatever it was, it must have been contagious because he bowed slightly and said, "My pleasure, lovely lady."

"Olivia, are you okay?" Lloyd's bushy eyebrows nearly met in the middle as he narrowed his eyes at me. His voice sliced through the air, ruining a fun moment, and I felt myself stand a little straighter. I squelched the urge to salute and swallowed a giggle.

Instead, I took a deep breath and said, "I suppose I'm a little shocked, but this night is important. I have to go. Please help me . . . it's for Jillian."

Lloyd walked over to an officer in regular clothes and pointed at me. They talked for awhile and she made a couple of calls. When she hung up, she walked over to me and said, "I'm detective Harper, Homicide Division. I understand you have an important event to attend tonight. I've talked to my boss, and Mr. Alan Lyons, who vouched for you. Both said you can leave if you allow me to inspect the bag you are carrying. I also want to meet with you tomorrow at time decided on by me. Do you agree with these stipulations?"

"Sure," I agreed.

BETWEEN THE LIES

After she inspected my clutch and tucked a card into the pocket, the detective said, “Your driver is waiting.”

I walked toward the handsome doctor of the dead and heard him say, “The body is still in the elevator. I’d like to get it out of there so your team can look for evidence.” I noticed him look in my direction. As I turned, my dress swished just so. Funny the things that matter at a crime scene and when a handsome man might be watching.

The driver who held my door open looked familiar, but I had no idea from where. He wore reflective sunglasses that wrapped around his eyes almost to his temples.

Something about him made my nerves jangle. Just like the homeless guy did at the cemetery. I wrote it off as anxiety from looking into the eyes of a dead man.

I opened my clutch and took a moment to apply powder to my face and freshen my lipstick. The little beaded purse held those two items, along with a credit card, my key cards, and my cell phone. I looked at the card the detective had tucked inside. On the back was her cell phone number under the words, *Talk to you soon.*

Relief she’d let me go washed over me. My exhale was evidently noticed by the way-too-nosey driver who lowered the window between us and asked, “May I do anything for you, Ms. Morgan?”

I put on my best haughty face and said, “Yes. Please put the window back up, and shut off the intercom.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I didn’t like him on a gut-level.

Refocusing my thoughts was easy, as long as I kept one corner of my mind in my safe place. After all, I was on my way to speak on behalf of sick children to honor Jillian’s memory, and to see Alan. A dead guy in an elevator wasn’t my problem; there were dozens of officials taking care of him. It was my night to shine, and a stranger was not going to tarnish it.

When the driver opened the door for me, a reporter shouted

BETWEEN THE LIES

out, “Ms. Morgan, did you know the dead man at your building?”

A camera flash blinded me, and I felt myself being escorted into the convention center.

I heard my driver say, “Move it,” and then someone asking who was going to pay for the broken camera.

Alan’s driver, Butch, met me just inside the door. My heart raced a little because this meant Alan was already on the premises. Butch, a bull of a man with a bald head, one grumpy-looking eyebrow, and a carefully trimmed beard, growled at the driver, “What are you doing here? Mr. Lyons fired you.”

“Driving the diva,” he said sounding like a smart-aleck teenager.

“Get out of here before the boss sees you, and stay away from her. You’ve been warned about this before.”

“Whatever you say Butchie-boy. I’m just keeping an eye on Mr. Lyons lady,” the driver said.

Butch took a step forward. “Leave now or this will get very bad for you. Ms. Morgan, step away from him. Now.”

The driver left, but first tipped his hat in my direction. “Until we meet again.”

“There will never be an again, idiot. Never,” Butch said through clenched teeth.

Startled by Butch’s words and tone, I asked him, “What was that all about?”

“Nothing. He’s just a driver Mr. Lyons has used before and doesn’t like. I’ll be calling for a different one to take you home. You’re early. Why?”

“I need to make sure everything is ready. Would you mind letting Mr. Lyons know I’m here?”

“He already knows.”

“Of course he does.” His constant “knowing” had always bothered me. So had Butch. It felt like I lived under surveillance.

“Any news on the dead guy in the elevator?” I asked.

“Who am I – your personal assistant?” Butch growled.

BETWEEN THE LIES

I shrugged off my annoyance and let myself get lost in my daughter's face. Life-sized pictures of her and the other children were strategically placed on easels all over the foyer.

I walked over to the one I cared about most and whispered, "Hi, Baby."

In the reflection of a large mirror beside her poster, I thought I saw Butch's eyes soften, but when I looked again, I realized I was wrong.

BETWEEN THE LIES