

BEHIND THE LIES

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PROLOGUE

All the lovey-dovey moments of move-in day faded by the next morning. I woke up livid and stayed that way for six months. My main goal was to avoid all human contact. After years of living under Alan's absolute rule, it wasn't as hard as it sounds on a practical level.

Just like in my bad old days, I ordered groceries over the phone. Later someone called and I picked them up outside the store. Online shopping covered my other purchases, and the mailman or parcel employees left them on the enclosed front porch.

The day I returned to Oak River, Ma told me she lied. I had a father who wasn't Gus. I guess she thought that showing up at my door with food and the truth would erase the past. For a few hours, I let myself get soft inside. Part of my emotional lapse might have been relief that the FBI proved me innocent of the murder of my childhood buddy, Mickey, who left me his house.

Plus, everyone seemed so glad to see me, but after a few hours of careful consideration, I knew they'd find a way to make me pay. There were always strings. No one could be trusted.

Not that the people I wanted to avoid most didn't try. Ma called and left sad, kind messages in a shaky voice. I listened then deleted them. She sniffed before she said, "I thought when you came back, it would be different." Her words reached my mind but went no further.

Even after our tender reunion in St. Paul, I resisted my sister, Pete. At first, I sent short, stiff texts, letting her know I needed some space.

A few days later, I quit responding. She still came over and knocked on my doors. From inside the kitchen door, my voice sounded as hollow as my heart. "Go away, Pete. If I'm ever ready to see you, I'll call you. Leave. Me. Alone."

She banged a fist on the door then used her best lawyer's voice. "At the very least, this is a case of personal bait and switch, Olivia. In St. Paul, you lured me into thinking we were going to be good. Your current rejection isn't illegal, but it's a lousy thing to do."

After she drove away, I stomped around Mickey's house for who knows how long ranting into the air. In my mind, the problem was my sister's. With our past, did she expect happily ever after?

Pete remained tenacious sending daily texts. Our St. Paul reunion had been everything I could have hoped for, but she was one of *them*, heart and soul. I saw it in the tender way she watched over Ma and didn't flinch when our mother mentioned Gus. His name still made me want to vomit. I was glad

he was dead. I decided to disregard her until I had the most effective words to tell her to back the heck off.

We were both still waiting.

When Mrs. D. stopped by the house, she never knocked, but she did slam the door to her big old car with gusto. I didn't go to the door until after dark when I opened it just long enough to get the treats she hung in little baggies on the knob. Most of the time, she left windmill cookies from the grocery store. They were my favorite years ago. They still must have been since I'd eaten every one of them and would have been disappointed if she stopped leaving them.

On the opposite end of my emotional spectrum, I also daydreamed about asking Ma, Pete, and Mrs. D. to visit Jillian's grave with me. I wanted to tell them about the little girl I'd kept from them because I knew my daughter would have liked that.

My moods had a whiplash-like quality to them.

I spent my days overthinking every little thing they'd ever said, not said, done, or not done. I found ridiculous satisfaction rehearsing what I'd say to them when I found the courage. I practiced my rants out loud and punctuated my statements with stomps of my feet, slammed doors, and fists raised into the air.

In my spare time, I meticulously organized my art supplies and every other little thing in the house daily.

The six months of self-imposed exile, a question rummaged around in my head like a hamster on a wheel. "Why did you move back to Oak River?"

No answers followed the inquiry.

When I wasn't busy disliking my family, I let my hate for Alan Lyons grow. After I gave him the best years of my life and his only child, he chose his wife over me when she gave him a financial ultimatum. I didn't blame her. She had been patient with his messing around with me and others for a long time.

She helped out as my attorney when the FBI was sure I'd murdered Mickey. But I still wasn't fond of her. I was sure the feeling was mutual.

As I cruised through the small house for the umpteenth time that day, my internal discomfort grew. I'd paid a lot of money to fix up the place my childhood friend, Mickey, left me in his will, but so far, it was his house, not my home. I had no idea what that should be like, but I hoped for something more peaceful. Instead I received relentless agitation.

With my fingernails digging into the palms of my hands, I asked the silent house, “What am I missing?” I have no idea how long I stood there waiting for some kind of cosmic response but, as the sun crept up from its nighttime rondeaux with the other side of the earth, my answer stabbed my heart.

Home felt like Jillian. And she was in a cemetery.

My tears ticked me off. Then in my memory, I heard my daughter’s sweet voice. It had been a dreary day when Alan promised to show up but didn’t. “Mama, you always feel better when you draw in your secret sketch pad. Would you make me a picture?”

Jillian was right. Determination rose. I faced the room I called my studio.

After years of Alan’s prohibition, I was going to do art no matter what. But not for my daughter. This time it was for me. Because the ugly pain had to go somewhere, or it would kill me.

CHAPTER 1

I wiped away the cold remnants of tears and tip-toed barefooted into the room where I’d hoped my dreams would come true. I pictured ghosts in every gray, shadowy corner, ready to remind me of my many failures.

I told them to leave – out loud. Very loud.

The golden oak of my drawing table and restored floor glistened in the soft light from the window filling the room with an incandescent glow. Unopened tubes of paint beside my easel beckoned. After a couple of stretches to prepare my body for the work ahead, something fierce rolled through and then poured out of me.

I squeezed blobs of paint onto my palette and jabbed my brush into them. In my mind, I saw each violent move before I made it. For a second, I wondered if this is what people meant when they talked about out of body experiences.

The rage, torment, chaos, jealousy, grief, regret, condemnation, and rejection drove the brush until my arm ached. I stood gasping for air the way one might after running a marathon with no training.

Thirsty and shaking, I left the grotesque piece. In the kitchen, I grabbed a bottle of water. The air-cooled sweat on my back and under my arms caused me to shiver. I’d gulped about half the water down when the doorbell rang. Standing still, I waited for whoever it was to leave.

Lloyd, Jillian's protector, pounded on the door frame again hard enough that the old beveled glass shook. "Olivia, I know you're in there. If you don't open this door, I'll call the local cops and report my concern for you. Then together, we'll legally break it down."

I walked toward his voice, knowing he would make good on his threat. "Dang it, Lloyd, I'm not in the mood to see anyone."

"Harper sent me. Come on. Let me in. Do you want your neighbors to hear what I have to say?"

I unlocked the door, leaving him to open it for himself. He was an intruder, not a guest, so it was what he deserved.

The door closed gently behind him.

I turned to face him. "If Harper's so worried, why didn't she come herself?"

"Harper is tied up on a case now but wanted to know how you are. She's worried about you – we both are. Why won't you respond to our texts and voicemails?"

"It's not a crime to want some time alone."

"No, but a short response letting one of us know you're okay would have been respectful."

My fingers squeezed hard into my hips. "Well, now that you know I'm fine, you can report back."

The ex-marine wore his warrior's face – his gray eyes steel-hard, his jaw clenched, and his crew-cut stood up straight, but it was the soft tone of his voice that got my attention. "Yeah. You look fine, Olivia. When's the last time you looked in a mirror?"

My bare feet hit the ceramic tile floor in the bathroom with a slap, but the cold sting was not as shocking as what the mirror revealed. Stringy bangs stood up in places while the rest of my hair was pressed down in oily globs. When had I showered last? Days. At least.

Paint splatters covered my face, hands, and clothes. There was a brown splash on my Grinch-green t-shirt that might have been coffee, although I didn't remember drinking that any recently, let alone spilling it. The sweat under my arms was partially dry, and the air around me stunk.

My hands knotted into fists, and I stomped back into the living room so hard my feet hurt. "I'm a mess. So what?"

He looked straight into my eyes. "I'm relieved you look the way you do."

“Who are you? My grief counselor?”

“I don’t know what I am for sure, but I may be your friend. I was Jillian’s. That should be the only recommendation you need.” Her name undid me, and I started to bawl – big snotty sobs.

Smart man that he was, he didn’t reach for me but stood his ground in his military “at ease” kind of way. “Is it safe to assume from the splotches all over you that you’ve been painting?”

“Yeah – what of it?” My snide tone did not affect him. His voice remained level. “Show me.”

I pointed toward my studio. “It’s in there.”

Lloyd stepped into the room with me right behind him. Looking at the canvass, he rubbed his hand over his crew-cut. “Olivia. This is intense. Are you sure you want to be alone in this suffering?”

A harsh laugh escaped into the air between us. “What are you so worried about? You know better than most that alone seems to be my natural state.”

He moved closer to the easel. “This is compelling – like when you overhear people arguing in the mall or come upon an accident on the freeway – you don’t want to listen or look, but you can’t help yourself. Where did you find the courage to paint this terrible truth?”

Standing back, I saw my agony smeared all over the canvas. The urge to demand he leave rose, but not wanting to give him the satisfaction, I held the words back.

He turned and faced me. “What are you going to do with this?”

“Pack it away. Or maybe I’ll burn it. You are likely the only one who will ever see it.”

He put his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “You captured the way I felt when I came home from combat. I still have days that look and sound like this. You heard the screams of your pain and the static of the chaos exploding in your head while you painted, didn’t you?” I tried to give him the evil eye, but he was still staring at the canvass. “The slashes of your paintbrush reveal part of your soul and mine we’d both prefer to keep hidden.”

I wiped my nose on the hem of my shirt. “Do you want it?”

“No. But this has a purpose. I hope you’ll keep it for a while.”

“Are you going to tell Harper about this?”

My question brought him back from where he'd gone. "Yes. I am. Have you considered counseling? Maybe you have PTSD." His voice got softer. "You've been through more than most people know. It might help to tell someone all of it."

My hands were digging into my hips again. I wanted to say something intelligent or snarky, but his concern pushed back some of the blistering fire tempting my tongue. "That's not going to happen. I'm fine."

"Man, I hope you're right." He glanced at his large military-style watch. It looked heavy. "I need to go."

After I shut the door behind him, he stood on my porch and made a phone call. He wasn't trying to be quiet, when he said, "Hi, Harper. Olivia is alive, but there's a boatload of hurt inside her. She's got some new art in her studio. It was like seeing her soul chained to a dungeon full of anguish." He listened for a moment then said, "I'll see you then."

Unable to resist, I hollered, "You're getting poetic in your old age, Lloyd!"

He turned toward the door, looked at me through the pitted glass. "Keep that to yourself, Morgan. And give yourself a break. Try to see yourself the way Jillian did. She was right about you."

The groan hurt my throat as it escaped.

Lloyd reached for the doorknob. "Olivia, I'm. . ."

I held up my hand traffic cop style. "Please, just go."

After he left, the fact that I had a friend, maybe two, ushered in an unfamiliar relief. In time I would consider his parting advice because he'd always been honest with me. I realized I trusted him the way I did Deacon.

Exhaustion took over. After my encounter with my reflection, I took a shower, ate the last half of a box of pre-sweetened cereal, and went to bed. Who cared if the sun hadn't set yet? Not me.

Before I fell into the nightmares that ruled my sleep, I knew things had to change soon, but I had no idea how to get out of the abyss I'd created for myself.

The next morning, after cleaning up, I wandered out to the kitchen with Mickey's small walnut bat. I put it in the corner by the door. He'd made it in shop class way back when and it came with the house. Since the night I'd moved in, I kept it within reach because having it close felt good.

Standing at my kitchen window, I looked at the backyard. Beyond the metal barrier of chain link was the Oak Creek walking trail.

Suddenly, a young man with binoculars stepped out from behind a tree across the path and aimed the lenses toward Mickey's house. It was as if we had eye contact. In a couple of seconds, a few details registered. Baseball cap. Red and black with a gold emblem on it. A black t-shirt and blue jeans. Dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. An impression of youth. Tall, slender body.

I grabbed the bat on my way outside. Standing in my yard with my weapon poised, I shook it at a now empty trail.

Back in my kitchen, I wasn't sure which scared me more – seeing a guy standing out there who might have been a figment of my imagination or the fear that a neighbor or two might have seen me.

When the front doorbell rang, I jumped again.