

The background is a bright yellow with a fine, woven texture. Several large, vibrant purple hibiscus flowers are scattered across the cover, some in full bloom and others as individual petals. The author's name is printed in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters at the top.

**JODI PICOULT**

*#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING*

*AUTHOR OF WISH YOU WERE HERE*

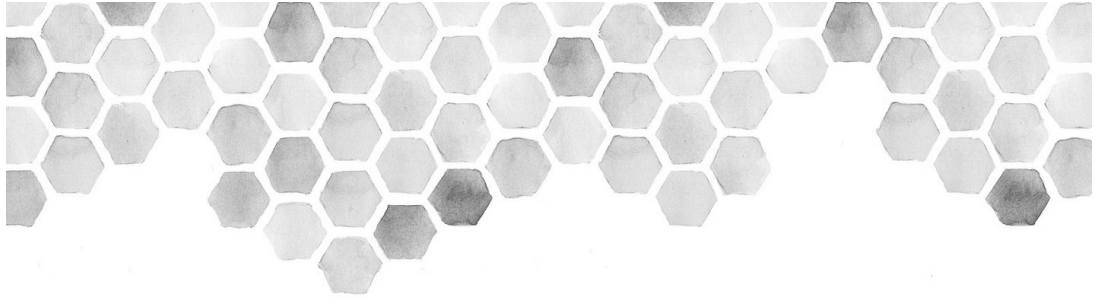
**MAD  
HONEY**

**A NOVEL**

**and JENNIFER  
FINNEY BOYLAN**

*BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SHE'S NOT THERE*





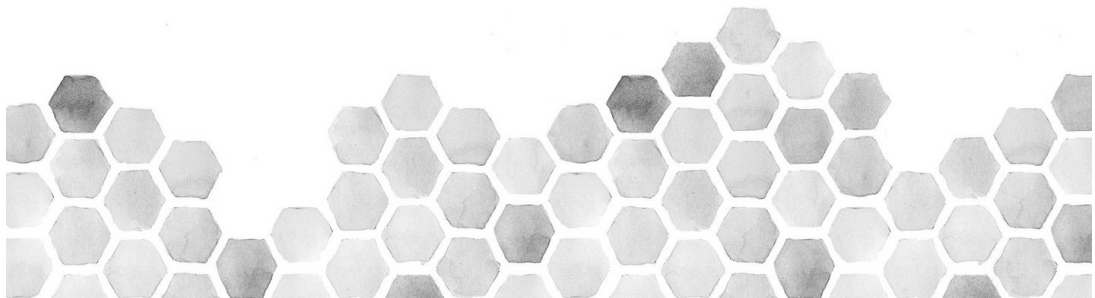
# MAD HONEY

*A Novel*

JODI PICOULT AND  
JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN



BALLANTINE BOOKS  
NEW YORK



*Mad Honey* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.*

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

# OLIVIA 1

DECEMBER 7, 2018

## *The day of*

**F**rom the moment I knew I was having a baby, I wanted it to be a girl. I wandered the aisles of department stores, touching doll-size dresses and tiny sequined shoes. I pictured us with matching nail polish—me, who'd never had a manicure in my life. I imagined the day her fairy hair was long enough to capture in pigtails, her nose pressed to the glass of a school bus window; I saw her first crush, prom dress, heartbreak. Each vision was a bead on a rosary of future memories; I prayed daily.

As it turned out, I was not a zealot...only a martyr.

When I gave birth, and the doctor announced the baby's sex, I did not believe it at first. I had done such a stellar job of convincing myself of what I *wanted* that I completely forgot what I *needed*. But when I held Asher, slippery as a minnow, I was relieved.

Better to have a boy, who would never be someone's victim.

—

**MOST PEOPLE IN** Adams, New Hampshire, know me by name, and those who don't, know to steer clear of my home. It's often that way for beekeepers—like firefighters, we willingly put ourselves into situations that are the stuff of others' nightmares. Honeybees are far less vindictive than their yellow jacket cousins, but people can't often tell the difference, so anything that stings and buzzes comes to be seen as a potential hazard. A few hundred yards past the antique Cape, my colonies form a semicircular rainbow of hives, and most of the spring and summer the bees

zip between them and the acres of blossoms they pollinate, humming a warning.

I grew up on a small farm that had been in my father's family for generations: an apple orchard that, in the fall, sold cider and donuts made by my mother and, in the summer, had pick-your-own strawberry fields. We were land-rich and cash-poor. My father was an apiarist by hobby, as was his father before him, and so on, all the way back to the first McAfee who was an original settler of Adams. It is just far enough away from the White Mountain National Forest to have affordable real estate. The town has one traffic light, one bar, one diner, a post office, a town green that used to be a communal sheep grazing area, and Slade Brook—a creek whose name was misprinted in a 1789 geological survey map, but which stuck. *Slate* Brook, as it should have been written, was named for the eponymous rock mined from its banks, which was shipped far and wide to become tombstones. *Slade* was the surname of the local undertaker and village drunk, who had a tendency to wander off when he was on a bender, and who ironically killed *himself* by drowning in six inches of water in the creek.

When I first brought Braden to meet my parents, I told him that story. He had been driving at the time; his grin flashed like lightning. *But who, he'd asked, buried the undertaker?*

Back then, we had been living outside of DC, where Braden was a resident in cardiac surgery at Johns Hopkins and I worked at the National Zoo, trying to cobble together enough money for a graduate program in zoology. We'd only been together three months, but I had already moved in with him. We were visiting my parents that weekend because I knew, viscerally, that Braden Fields was *the one*.

On that first trip back home, I had been so sure of what my future would hold. I was wrong on all counts. I never expected to be an apiarist like my father; I never thought I'd wind up sleeping in my childhood bedroom once again as an adult; I never imagined I'd settle down on a farm my older brother, Jordan, and I once could not wait to leave. I married Braden; he got a fellowship at Mass General; we moved to Boston; I was a doctor's wife. Then, almost a year to the day of my wedding anniversary, my father didn't come home one evening after



checking his hives. My mother found him, dead of a heart attack in the tall grass, bees haloing his head.

My mother sold the piece of land that held our apple orchard to a couple from Brooklyn. She kept the strawberry fields but was thoroughly at a loss when it came to my father's hives. Since my brother was busy with a high-powered legal career and my mother was allergic to bees, the apiary fell to me. For five years, I drove from Boston to Adams every week to take care of the colonies. After Asher was born, I'd bring him with me, leaving him in the company of my mother while I checked the hives. I fell in love with beekeeping, the slow-motion flow of pulling a frame out of a hive, the Where's Waldo? search for the queen. I expanded from five colonies to fifteen. I experimented with bee genetics with colonies from Russia, from Slovenia, from Italy. I signed pollination contracts with the Brooklynites and three other local fruit orchards, setting up new hives on their premises. I harvested, processed, and sold honey and beeswax products at farmers' markets from the Canadian border to the suburbs of Massachusetts. I became, almost by accident, the first commercially successful beekeeper in the history of apiarist McAfees. By the time Asher and I moved permanently to Adams, I knew I might never get rich doing this, but I could make a living.

My father taught me that beekeeping is both a burden and a privilege. You don't bother the bees unless they need your help, and you help them when they need it. It's a feudal relationship: protection in return for a percentage of the fruits of their labors.

He taught me that if a body is easily crushed, it develops a weapon to prevent that from happening.

He taught me that sudden movements get you stung.

I took these lessons a bit too much to heart.

On the day of my father's funeral, and years later, on the day of my mother's, I told the bees. It's an old tradition to inform them of a death in the family; if a beekeeper dies, and the bees aren't asked to stay on with their new master, they'll leave. In New Hampshire, the custom is to sing, and the news has to rhyme. So I draped each colony with black crepe, knocked softly, crooned the truth. My beekeeping net became a funeral veil. The hive might well have been a coffin.

---

BY THE TIME I come downstairs that morning, Asher is in the kitchen. We have a deal, whoever gets up first makes the coffee. My mug still has a wisp of steam rising. He is shoveling cereal into his mouth, absorbed in his phone.

“Morning,” I say, and he grunts in response.

For a moment, I let myself stare at him. It’s hard to believe that the soft-centered little boy who would cry when his hands got sticky with propolis from the hives can now lift a super full of forty pounds of honey as if it weighs no more than his hockey stick. Asher is over six feet tall, but even as he was growing, he was never ungainly. He moves with the kind of grace you find in wildcats, the ones that can steal away a kitten or a chick before you even realize they’ve gone. Asher has my blond hair and the same ghost-green eyes, for which I have always been grateful. He carries his father’s last name, but if I also had to see Braden every time I looked at my son, it would be that much harder.

I catalog the breadth of his shoulders, the damp curls at the nape of his neck; the way the tendons in his forearms shift and play as he scrolls through his texts. It’s shocking, sometimes, to be confronted with *this* when a second ago he sat on my shoulders, trying to pull down a star and unravel a thread of the night.

“No practice this morning?” I ask, taking a sip of my coffee. Asher has been playing hockey as long as we’ve lived here; he skates as effortlessly as he walks. He was made captain as a junior and reelected this year, as a senior. I never can remember whether they have rink time before school or after, as it changes daily.

His lips tug with a slight smile, and he types a response into his phone, but doesn’t answer.

“Hello?” I say. I slip a piece of bread into the ancient toaster, which is jerry-rigged with duct tape that occasionally catches on fire. Breakfast for me is always toast and honey, never in short supply.

“I guess you have practice later,” I try, and then provide the answer that Asher doesn’t. “Why yes, Mom, thanks for taking such an active interest in my life.”

I fold my arms across my boxy cable-knit sweater. “Am I too old to wear this tube top?” I ask lightly.

Silence.

“I’m sorry I won’t be here for dinner, but I’m running away with a cult.”

I narrow my eyes. “I posted that naked photo of you as a toddler on Instagram for Throwback Thursday.”

Asher grunts noncommittally. My toast pops up; I spread it with honey and slide into the chair directly across from Asher. “I’d really prefer that you not use my Mastercard to pay for your Pornhub subscription.”

His eyes snap to mine so fast I think I can hear his neck crack. “*What?*”

“Oh, hey,” I say smoothly. “Nice to have your attention.”

Asher shakes his head, but he puts down his phone. “I didn’t use your Mastercard,” he says.

“I know.”

“I used your Amex.”

I burst out laughing.

“Also: never *ever* wear a tube top,” he says. “Jesus.”

“So you *were* listening.”

“How could I *not*?” Asher winces. “Just for the record, nobody else’s mother talks about porn over breakfast.”

“Aren’t you the lucky one, then.”

“Well,” he says, shrugging. “Yeah.” He lifts his coffee mug, clicks it to mine, and sips.

I don’t know what other parents’ relationships are like with their children, but the one between me and Asher was forged in fire and, maybe for that reason, is invincible. Even though he’d rather be caught dead than have me throw my arms around him after a winning game, when it’s just the two of us, we are our own universe, a moon and a planet tied together in orbit. Asher may not have grown up in a household with two parents, but the one he has would fight to the death for him.

“Speaking of porn,” I reply, “how’s Lily?”

He chokes on his coffee. “If you love me, you will never say that sentence again.”

Asher's girlfriend is tiny, dark, with a smile so wide it completely changes the landscape of her face. If Asher is strength, then she is whimsy—a sprite who keeps him from taking himself too seriously; a question mark at the end of his predictable, popular life. Asher's had no shortage of romantic entanglements with girls he's known since kindergarten. Lily is a newcomer to town.

This fall, they have been inseparable. Usually, at dinner, it's *Lily did this* or *Lily said that*.

"I haven't seen her around this week," I say.

Asher's phone buzzes. His thumbs fly, responding.

"Oh, to be young and in love," I muse. "And unable to go thirty seconds without communicating."

"I'm texting Dirk. He broke a lace and wants to know if I have extra."

One of the guys on his hockey team. I have no actual proof, but I've always felt like Dirk is the kid who oozes charm whenever he's in front of me and then, when I'm gone, says something vile, like *Your mom is hot, bro*.

"Will Lily be at your game on Saturday?" I ask. "She should come over afterward for dinner."

Asher nods and jams his phone in his pocket. "I have to go."

"You haven't even finished your cereal—"

"I'm going to be late."

He takes a long last swallow of coffee, slides his backpack over his shoulder, and grabs his car keys from the bowl on the kitchen counter. He drives a 1988 Jeep he bought with the salary he made as a counselor at hockey camp.

"Take a coat!" I call, as he is walking out the door. "It's—"

His breath fogs in the air; he slides behind the steering wheel and turns the ignition.

"Snowing," I finish.

—

DECEMBER IS WHEN beekeepers catch their breath. The fall is a flurry of activity, starting with the honey harvest, then managing mite loads, and getting the bees ready to survive a New Hampshire winter. This



involves mixing up a heavy sugar syrup that gets poured into a hive top feeder, then wrapping the entire hive for insulation before the first cold snap. The bees conserve their energy in the winter, and so should the apiarist.

I've never been very good with downtime.

There's snow on the ground, and that's enough to send me up to the attic to find the box of Christmas decorations. They're the same ones my mother used when I was little—ceramic snowmen for the kitchen table; electric candles to set in each window at night, a string of lights for the mantel. There's a second box, too, with our stockings and the ornaments for the tree, but it's tradition that Asher and I hang those together. Maybe this weekend we will cut down our tree. We could do it after his game on Saturday, with Lily.

*I'm not ready to lose him.*

The thought stops me in my tracks. Even if we do not invite Lily to come choose a tree with us—to decorate it as he tells her the story behind the stick reindeer ornament he made in preschool or the impossibly tiny baby shoes, both his and mine, that we always hang on the uppermost branches—soon another will join our party of two. It is what I want most for Asher—the relationship I don't have. I know that love isn't a zero-sum game, but I'm selfish enough to hope he's all mine for a little while longer.

I lug the first box down the attic stairs, hearing Asher's voice in my head: *Why didn't you wait? I could have carried it down for you.* Glancing through the open door of his bedroom, I roll my eyes at his unmade bed. It drives me crazy that he does not tuck in his sheets; it drives him just as crazy to do it, when he knows he's just going to crawl back in in a few hours. With a sigh, I put the box down and walk into Asher's room. I yank the sheets up, straightening his covers. As I do, a book falls to the floor.

It's a blank journal, in which Asher has sketched in colored pencil. There's a bee, hovering above an apple blossom, so close that you can see the working mandible and the pollen caught on her legs. There's my old truck, a 1960 powder-blue Ford that belonged to my father.

Asher has always had this softer side, I love him all the more for it. It was clear when he was little that he had artistic talent, and once I even enrolled him in a painting class, but his hockey friends found out. When he

messed up doing a passing drill, one of them said he should maybe stop holding his stick like Bob Ross held a brush, and he dropped art. Now, when he draws, it's in private. He never shows me his work. But we've also gotten college brochures in the mail from RISD and SCAD, and *I* wasn't the one to request them.

I flip the next few pages. There is one drawing that is clearly me, although he's captured me from behind, as I stand at the sink. I look tired, worn. *Is that what he thinks of me?* I wonder.

A chipmunk, eyes bright with challenge. A stone wall. A girl—Lily?—with her arm thrown over her eyes, lying on a bed of leaves, naked from the waist up.

Immediately, I drop the book like it's burning. I press my palms against my cheeks.

It's not like I didn't think he was intimate with his girlfriend; but then again, it's not like we talked about it, either. At one point, when he started high school, I proactively started buying condoms and leaving them very matter-of-factly with the usual pharmacy haul of deodorant and razor blades and shampoo. Asher loves Lily—even if he hasn't told me this directly, I see it in the way he lights up when she sits down beside him, how he checks her seatbelt when she gets into his car.

After a minute, I mess up Asher's sheets and comforter again. I tuck the journal under a fold of the linens, pick up the pair of socks, and close the door of the bedroom behind me.

I hoist the Christmas box into my arms again, thinking two things: that memories are so heavy; and that my son is entitled to his secrets.

—

**BEEKEEPING IS THE** world's second-oldest profession. The first apiarists were the ancient Egyptians. Bees were royal symbols, the tears of Re, the sun god.

In Greek mythology, Aristaeus, the god of beekeeping, was taught by nymphs to tend bees. He fell in love with Orpheus's wife, Eurydice. When she was dodging his advances, she stepped on a snake and died. Orpheus went to hell itself to bring her back, and Eurydice's nymph sisters punished Aristaeus by killing all his bees.

The Bible promises a land of milk and honey. The Koran says paradise has rivers of honey for those who guard against evil. Krishna, the Hindu deity, is often shown with a blue bee on his forehead. The bee itself is considered a symbol of Christ: the sting of justice and the mercy of honey, side by side.

The first voodoo dolls were molded from beeswax; an *oungan* might tell you to smear honey on a person to keep ghosts at bay; a *manbo* would make little cakes of honey, amaranth, and whiskey, which, eaten before the new moon, could show you your future.

I sometimes wonder which of my prehistoric ancestors first stuck his arm into a hole in a tree. Did he come out with a handful of honey, or a fistful of stings? Is the promise of one worth the risk of the other?

—

WHEN THE INSIDE of the house is draped with its holiday jewelry, I pull on my winter boots and a parka and hike through the acreage of the property to gather evergreen boughs. This requires me to skate the edges of the fields with the few apple trees that still belong to my family. Against the frosty ground, they look insidious and witchy, their gnarled arms reaching, the wind whispering in the voice of dead leaves, *Closer, closer*. Asher used to climb them; once, he got so high that I had to call the fire department to pull him down, as if he were a cat. I swing my handsaw as I slip into the woods behind the orchard, twigs crunching underneath my footsteps. There are only so many trees whose feathered limbs I can reach; most are higher than I can reach on my tiptoes, but there's satisfaction in gathering what I can. The pile of pine and spruce and fir grows, and it takes me three trips to bring it all back across the orchard fields to the porch of the farmhouse.

By the time I've got my raw materials—the branches and a spool of florist wire—my cheeks are flushed and bright and the tips of my ears are numb. I lay out the evergreens on the porch floor, trimming them with clippers, doubling and tripling the boughs so that they are thick. In the Christmas box I carried down earlier is a long rope of lights that I'll weave through my garland when this step is finished; then I can affix the greenery around the frame of the front door.

I am not sure what it is that makes me think something is watching me.

All the hair stands up on the back of my neck, and I turn slowly toward the barren strawberry fields.

In the snow, they look like a swath of white cotton. This late in the year, the back of the field is wreathed in shadow. In the summertime, we get raccoons and deer going after the strawberries; from time to time there's a coyote. When it's nearly winter, though, the predators have mostly squirreled themselves away in their dens—

I take off at a dead run for my beehives.

Before I even reach the electric fence that surrounds them, the smell of bananas is pungent—the surest sign of bees that are pissed off. Four hives are sturdy and quiet, hunkered tight within their insulation. But the box all the way to the right has been ripped to splinters. I name all my queen bees after female divas: Adele, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Whitney, and Mariah. Taylor, Britney, Miley, Aretha, and Ariana are in the apple orchard; on other contracts I have Sia, Dionne, Cher, and Katy. The hive that has been attacked is Celine's.

One side of the electric fence has been barreled through, trampled. Struts of wood from the hive are scattered all over the snowy ground; hunks of Styrofoam have been clawed to shreds. I stumble over a piece of broken honeycomb with a bear print in it.

I narrow my eyes at the dark line where the field turns into forest, but the bear is already gone. The bees would have killed themselves, literally, to get rid of their attacker—stinging until it lumbered away.

It's not the first time I have had a bear attack a hive, but it's the latest it has ever happened in the beekeeping season.

I walk toward the brush near the edge of the field, trying to find any remaining bees that might not have frozen. A small knot seethes and drips, dark as molasses, on the bare crotch of a sugar maple. I cannot see Celine, but if the bees have absconded there is a chance she is with them.

Sometimes, in the spring, bees swarm. You might find them like this, in the bivouac stage—the temporary site before they fly off to whatever they've decided should be their new home.

When bees swarm in the spring, it's because they've run out of space in the hive.



When bees swarm in the spring, they're full of honey and happy and calm.

When bees swarm in the spring, you can often recapture them, and set them up in a new box, where they have enough room for their brood cells and pollen and honey.

This is not a swarm. These bees are angry and these bees are desperate.

"Stay," I beg, and then I run back to the farmhouse as fast as I can.

It takes me three trips, each a half mile across the fields, skidding on the dusting of snow. I have to haul out a new wooden base and an empty hive from a colony that failed last year, into which I will try to divert the bees; I have to grab my bee kit from the basement, where I've stored it for the winter—my smoker and hive tool, some wire and a bee brush, my hat and veil and gloves. I am sweating by the time I am finished, my hands shaking and sausage-fingered from the cold. Clumsily, I grab the few frames that can be salvaged from the bear's attack and set them into the brood box. I sew some of the newly broken comb onto the frames with wire, hoping that the bees will be attracted back to the familiar. When the new box is set up, I walk toward the sugar maple.

The light is so low now, because dusk comes early. I see the motion of the bees more than their actual writhing outline. If Asher were here, I could have him hold the brood box directly below the branch while I scoop the bees into it, but I'm alone.

It takes several tries for me to light a curl of birch bark to ignite my smoker; there's just enough wind to make it difficult. Finally, a red ember sparks, and I drop it into the little metal pot, onto a handful of wood shavings. Smoke pipes out of the narrow neck as I pump the bellows a few times. I give a few puffs near the bees; it dulls their senses and takes the aggressive edge off.

I pull on my hat and veil and lift the same handsaw I used on the evergreen boughs. The branch is about six inches too high for me to reach. Cursing, I lug the broken wooden base of the old frame underneath the tree and try to gingerly balance on what's left of it. The odds are about equal that I will either manage to saw down the branch or break my ankle. I nearly sob with relief when the branch is free, and carry it slowly and

gently to the new hive. I give it a sharp jerk, watching the bees rain down into the box. I do this again, praying that the queen is one of them.

If it were warmer, I'd know for sure. A few bees would gather on the landing board with their butts facing out, fanning their wings and nasonoving—spreading pheromones for strays to find their way home. That's a sign that the hive is queenright. But it's too cold, and so I pull out each frame, scanning the frenzy of bees. Celine, thank God, is a marked queen—I spy the green painted dot on her long narrow back and pluck her by the wings into a queen catcher, a little plastic contraption that looks like one of those butterfly clips for hair. The queen catcher will keep her safe for a couple of days while they all get used to the new home. But it also guarantees that the colony won't abscond. Sometimes, bees just up and leave with their queen if they don't like their circumstances. If the queen is locked up, they will not leave without her.

I let a puff of smoke roll over the top of the box, again hoping to calm the bees. I try to set the queen catcher between frames of comb, but my fingers are stiff with the cold and keep slipping. When my hand strikes the edge of the wooden box, one of the worker bees sinks her stinger into me.

“*Motherfucker.*” I gasp, dancing backward from the hive. A cluster of bees follows me, attracted by the scent of the attack. I cradle my palm, tears springing to my eyes.

I tear off my hat and veil, bury my face in my hands. I can take all the best precautions for this queen; I can feed the bees sugar syrup and insulate their new brood box; I can pray as hard as I want—but this colony does not have a chance of surviving the winter. They simply will not have enough time to build up the stores of honey that the bear has robbed.

And yet. I cannot just give up on them.

So I gently set the telescoping cover on the box and lift my bee kit with my good hand. In the other, I hold a snowball against the sting as a remedy. I trudge back to the farmhouse. Tomorrow, I'll give them the kindness of extra food in a hive-top feeder and I'll wrap the new box, but it's hospice care. There are some trajectories you cannot change, no matter what you do.

Back home, I am so absorbed in icing my throbbing palm that I don't notice it's long past dinnertime, and Asher isn't home.

**THE FIRST TIME** it happened, it was over a password.

I had only just signed up for Facebook, mostly so that I could see pictures of my brother, Jordan, and his wife, Selena. Braden and I were living in a brownstone on Mass Ave while he did his Mass General fellowship in cardiac surgery. Most of our furniture had come from yard sales in the suburbs that we would drive to on weekends. One of our best finds came from an old lady who was moving to an assisted living community. She was selling an antique rolltop desk with claw-feet (I said it was a gryphon; Braden said eagle). It was clearly an antique, but someone had stripped it of its original finish, so it wasn't worth much, and more to the point, we could afford it. It wasn't until we got it home that we realized it had a secret compartment—a narrow little sliver between the wooden drawers that was intended to look decorative, but pulled loose to reveal a spot where documents and papers could be hidden. I was delighted, naturally, hoping for the combination to an old safe full of gold bullion or a torrid love letter, but the only thing we found inside was a paper clip. I had pretty much forgotten about its existence when I had to choose a password for Facebook, and find a place to store it for when I inevitably forgot what I'd picked. What better place than in the secret compartment?

We had initially bought the antique desk so that Braden could study at it, but when we realized that his laptop was too deep for the space, it became decorative, tucked in an empty space at the bottom of the stairs. We kept our car keys there, and my purse, and an occasional plant I hadn't yet murdered. Which is why I was so surprised to find Braden sitting in front of it one evening, fiddling with the hidden compartment.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He reached inside and triumphantly pulled out the piece of paper. “Seeing what secrets you keep from me,” he said.

It was so ridiculous I laughed. “I'm an open book,” I told him, but I took the paper out of his hand.

His eyebrows raised. “What's on there?”

“My Facebook password.”

“So what?”

“So,” I said, “it’s mine.”

Braden frowned. “If you had nothing to hide, you’d show it to me.”

“What do you think I’m doing on Facebook?” I said, incredulous.

“You tell me,” Braden replied.

I rolled my eyes. But before I could say anything, his hand shot out for the paper.

*PEPPER70*. That’s what it said. The name of my first dog and my birth year. Blatantly uninspired; something he could have figured out on his own. But the principle of the whole stupid argument kicked in, and I yanked the page away before he could snatch it.

That’s when it changed—the tone, the atmosphere. The air went still between us, and his pupils dilated. He reached out, striking like a snake, and grabbed my wrist.

On instinct, I pulled back and darted up the stairs. Thunder, him running behind me. My name twisted on his lips. It was silly; it was stupid; it was a game. But it didn’t feel like one, not the way my heart was hammering.

As soon as I made it to our bedroom I slammed the door shut. Leaning my forehead against it, I tried to catch my breath.

Braden shouldered it open so hard that the frame splintered.

I didn’t realize what had happened until my vision went white and I felt a hammer between my eyes. I touched my nose and my fingers came away red with blood.

“Oh my God,” Braden murmured. “Oh my God, Liv. Jesus.” He disappeared for a moment and then he was holding a hand towel to my face, guiding me to sit on the bed, stroking my hair.

“I think it’s broken,” I choked out.

“Let me look,” he demanded. He gently peeled away the bloody cloth and with a surgeon’s tender hands touched the ridge of my brow, the bone beneath my eyes. “I don’t think so,” he said, his voice frayed.

Braden cleaned me up as if I were made of glass and then he brought me an ice pack. By then, the stabbing pain was gone. I ached, and my nose was stuffy. “My fingers are too cold,” I said, dropping the ice, and he picked it up and gently held it against me. I realized his hands were trembling and that he couldn’t look me in the eye.