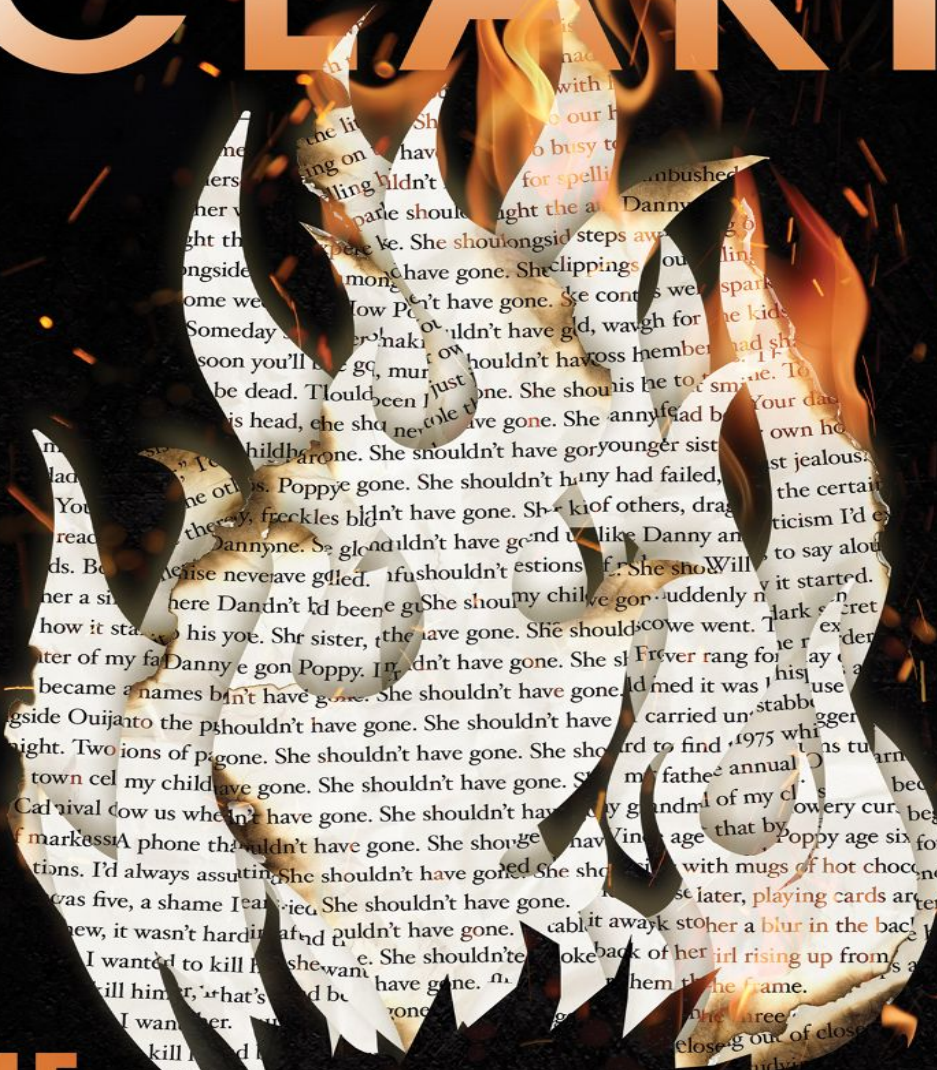


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIE CLARK



THE
A Novel

"Expertly plotted and exquisitely twisted."
—ASHLEY ELSTON, #1 *New York Times* bestselling
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Also by Julie Clark

The Lies I Tell

The Last Flight

THE GHOSTWRITER

A NOVEL

JULIE CLARK



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*For Poppy and all the young women—past and
present—who have continued her fight.*

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Author's Note

Part of this story takes place in Ojai, California, in the 1970s. I've done my best to stay true to the geography and people of that era, though I've had to make some minor changes to serve the story. The most notable change is the annual Ojai summer festival portrayed in these pages. There have been several Ojai carnivals over the decades: the original Ojai Day, which ran from 1917 to 1928, and another one in the 1950s. Nordhoff High School briefly hosted a carnival in the 1990s until, finally, Ojai Day was revived at Libby Park in the fall of 1991.

I also altered the geography of the neighborhood and houses surrounding the Ojai Meadows Preserve so as not to resemble any existing neighborhood or houses. My reasons will soon become clear.

Special thanks to Wendy Barker at the Ojai Valley Museum for putting me in touch with local historian and lifelong resident Craig Walker. Craig was instrumental in my understanding of 1970s Ojai, talking to me about the geography of what is now the Ojai Meadows Preserve and downtown areas as well as many of the things kids did in Ojai in the 1970s. Any errors are strictly my own.

Foreword

“I know what your dad did.”

It was the year I’d turned ten, and one of my classmates had slid onto the bench next to me at school, his voice a hot whisper in my ear.

I set down my bologna sandwich. “He wrote a book.” I hadn’t been wild about my father’s meteoric rise as an author. He talked louder. Drank more than usual—which had been a lot to begin with—and traveled more, leaving me home with his assistant, Melinda, a young woman who now let herself into our house with her own key. Who would tell me my father was too busy to sign my math tests or quiz me for spelling.

My father’s success had dazzled the literary world—his books were now sitting alongside Stephen King on the shelves and bestseller lists, and in some weeks even outselling him. But it had caught the attention of the rest of Ojai as well, sparking whispers and memories that became loud enough for the kids to notice.

The boy, whose name I no longer remember, had shaken his head, eyes sparkling with glee to be the one to tell me. To shatter my childhood right there in the school cafeteria. “Your dad killed his brother and sister. Murdered them in their own home.”

“You’re a liar,” I’d accused him. “You’re just jealous.”

But the reaction of the other kids around us stole the certainty from my voice. Because there wasn't the scornful skepticism I'd expected, but rather a silent shock that he'd had the guts to say aloud what everyone else already knew.

That's how it started. How I discovered the dark secret that lived at the center of my family.

From there, the murder of Danny and Poppy Taylor became a tale told in hushed whispers at slumber parties alongside Ouija boards and visits from Bloody Mary in the mirror at midnight. Two kids, just like us, stabbed to death in 1975 while the entire town celebrated the official beginning of summer at the annual Ojai Carnival one hundred yards behind their house.

All of my classmates became experts on the story, despite the fact that by the time it began circulating among them, Danny and Poppy had been dead for over fifteen years. How Poppy was supposed to meet her best friend at the Tilt-A-Whirl after making a quick stop at home for a sweater. How she'd been ambushed, murdered in her own bedroom while her older brother, Danny, had been killed in the hallway, just steps away from saving her.

Old newspaper clippings had been dug out of closets and passed around at recess like contraband, kids studying their class photos. Poppy's slight build, wavy hair that looked like it tangled easily, freckles blooming across her cheeks. The way Danny's face glowed with lost potential, his bright smile a promise never fulfilled.

They discussed where Danny had been found, how desperate he must have been to get to his younger sister, to protect her at the expense of his own life. But Danny had failed, Poppy had died, and their names became the property of others, dragged out of the past and into the present. *Don't end up like*

Danny and Poppy. Buried inside the rote questions of parents. *Will an adult be home?*

Everything in my childhood suddenly made sense. The low buzz that seemed to follow us wherever we went. That extra space in line at the supermarket. A phone that never rang for play dates or birthday party invitations. I'd always assumed it was because my mother had left when I was five, a shame I carried until a bigger one pushed it away.

Once I knew, it wasn't hard to find the albums tucked in the back of my father's closet.

An early photo, my grandmother's flowery cursive on the back—*Danny age nine, Vince age eight, Poppy age six*—lined up on a brown striped couch, posing with mugs of hot chocolate in their pajamas. Another, a few years later, playing cards around a small Formica kitchen table, their mother a blur in the background, their father's cigarette smoke a gentle swirl rising up from the ashtray at the edge of the frame.

I marked the passage of time as the three siblings aged, the years and days creeping closer to June 13, 1975.

Three years left as they washed the family's station wagon in the driveway—Danny in his OP shorts, holding the hose, my father a shirtless and skinny thirteen-year-old, bending over to sponge the hood of the car, and eleven-year-old Poppy shrieking as an arc of water hits her back.

Two years left at an academic awards ceremony for Danny, standing tall and handsome in his suit, my grandparents, still unbroken, flanking him on either side.

One year left at my father's fifteenth birthday party, hovering over a homemade birthday cake, glaring at whoever was taking the picture.

Ten months left in Poppy's ninth-grade class picture, her smile revealing a slightly crooked front tooth she probably hated, her long hair pulled back into two barrettes resting just above her ears. I wondered if, on some level, she knew the fate that awaited her at the end of the school year. If she knew that was going to be the last class photograph she ever took. Or if she was simply thinking about whether her hair looked okay or how she would do on a math quiz she might have had later that day.

I read and reread the ten-year retrospective, rehashing the same theories, the same questions that seemed to burn bright in the minds of those who knew Danny. Who'd loved Poppy. They all spoke of Danny's potential, his popularity, his sense of humor. They described Poppy's fierce commitment to equal rights. Her tenacity. Her dream of becoming a filmmaker.

And they spoke of my father as well. The way he'd carry a joke too far, often bordering on cruel. How he'd always strived—and failed—to fit in. At the time, they'd all wondered how awkward Vincent had managed to land that girlfriend.

The one who'd grow up to become my mother.

Their stories uncovered parts of myself that had always been there—my father's intensity. My mother's insecurity. My aunt's fire, and my uncle's charisma.

But as a ghostwriter—a person who listens to other people's stories and spins them into a narrative—I understand now how very hard it is to discover what someone has chosen to conceal. And when they die, their secrets get buried in time until there's no one around to remember them.

All that's left now is a fifty-year-old murder that sits at the center of my family, as much a part of my DNA as my brown hair.

I've imagined June 13, 1975, a million times. I can see it in my mind, as if from above, watching it unfold like a movie. A young teenage girl running home to grab a sweater, the house just ahead of her. Are the streetlights on yet? The coroner put her time of death at approximately seven in the evening, Danny's shortly after that.

Poppy had no idea what was about to happen to her in that house. The horrific nightmare her final moments would become. No matter how many ways I imagine it, she never had a chance. In the span of one hour, according to the autopsy results, my father had gone from middle child to only child.

Some people say the trauma is what pushed him to grow up to become one of the most prolific horror writers of his generation. Others are not so generous.

My father is a talented novelist—a professional liar by trade and by instinct. I'm not naive enough to think that everything he's told me is the absolute truth. I invite you to judge for yourself, as I've had to do.

Olivia Taylor Dumont

June 13, 2025

Chapter 1

March 2024

I'm washing my coffee mug, hot water tumbling into the deep copper sink, when my phone rings. Wiping my hands on a towel, I cross the room toward the long dining table I bought at a flea market years ago.

I grab the vibrating phone, expecting to see Tom's name and face flashing on the screen. He always calls on his way to the job site and we pass his commute with the never-ending topics we always turn over—why Congress behaves like a bunch of spoiled ten-year-olds. Or what really happened to JonBenét Ramsay. Other times, he'll counsel me through my panic that I haven't been hired for a job in a year. Regardless, ever since we met, we've never stopped talking. I finally understand what other people mean when they reference their *person*. Tom is my person and I'm his.

But it's not Tom calling; it's my literary agent, Nicole. The only person from the publishing world I speak to anymore. At first, my writing friends would check in with me, offering support. Invitations to meet up for coffee or drinks. Sending me links for writing retreats and conferences. But when I continued to pass on them, those invitations turned into supportive texts and emails, then eventually stopped altogether.

A flutter of hope passes through me. Perhaps my exile is finally over.

I glance out the window, across the deck to the wooden structure that serves as my writing studio, and wonder how many months it's been since I entered it. Six? Ten? My mind touches quickly on Tom again, the man who designed it, imagining his delight if I could tell him I finally landed a book.

"I hope you're calling about a job," I say.

It's been over a year since I sat onstage at a major literary conference—the only female writer asked to participate in a panel about ghostwriting in the twenty-first century—and torpedoed my career.

"I am," Nicole says, then hesitates as if she isn't sure how to proceed. "But it's not...typical."

I step through the sliding glass doors onto the flagstone patio that overlooks the canyon and, when it's clear, the ocean in the distance. But today the sky is gray, the green trees below me only just beginning to appear as the morning cloud cover starts to burn off. This house, perched high in the hills of Topanga Canyon and purchased with my first big advance—a book about a young female golfer who'd rocketed herself out of foster care and onto the national stage—was the closest I'd come to feeling at home since I left Ojai for the last time at age fourteen.

I love this house, with its stone and plaster walls, sensitive plumbing and quirky corners. Not everyone wants to live up a winding canyon road at least thirty minutes from basic amenities. Not to mention the yearly fires that keep Topanga's residents hyperalert to wind and weather conditions, go bags packed in the trunks of their cars, ready to evacuate at a moment's notice. But I understood the danger. The shadow of it familiar, like a country road leading you home, its twists and turns unwinding like a memory. When you grow up being told your father is a murderer, you learn how to compartmentalize danger in a way that allows you to ignore it most of the