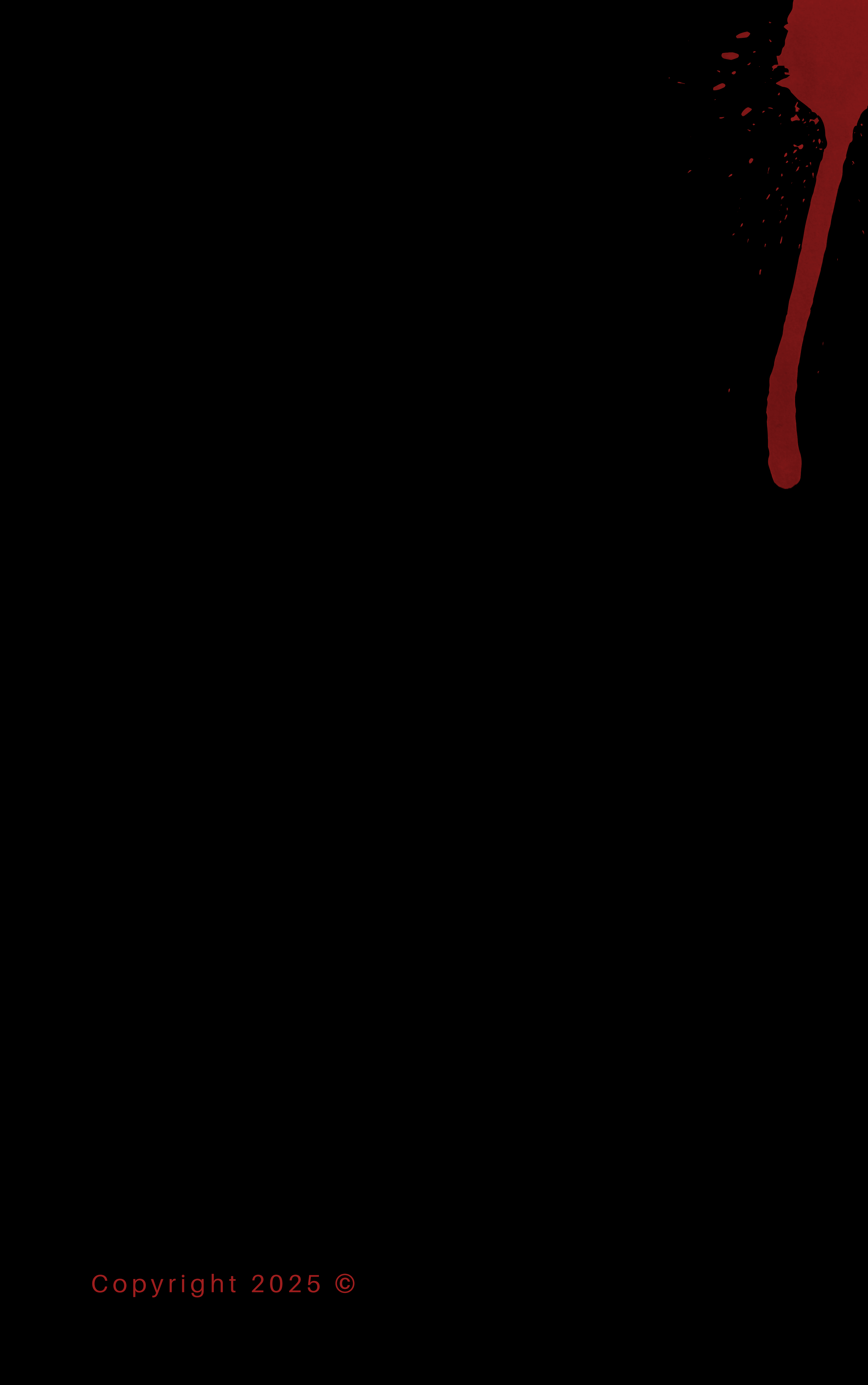




JULIA

BY A. CORRIN



"GOOD FOR HER."

Julia had a habit of walking alone. As a former lineman, and the only girl on an all boys football team, she feared not the streets that she strolled down every night after classes. She loved the night, when the city was asleep. She loved laying on the park benches, staring into what could be seen of the starry sky. She loved pretending that the city didn't exist around her. That the world was empty and only existed for her. She felt happy in this false sense of solitude. False, as she was hardly ever actually alone. Her company tonight thought her unaware, and at times she was, but never unprepared.

Lola made her promise that she'd stop walking around alone. Lola knew Julia was a less likely victim of mal intent, but she worried for her all the same. Julia's phone rang for the fourth time that night. "Hello?"

"Hey, have you made it back to your dorm yet?"

"Not yet. It's a nice night, I thought I'd take my time walking."

"You promised you would stop doing that. There are a lot of new people in town, and some of them are kind of creepy. I've been getting notifications about sex offenders in the area."

"I'll be fine. I have a couple of self-defense items with me. You should really stay off of those weird Facebook groups."

"Those Facebook groups come in handy. They were talking about one guy that people really should be cautious of. I can't quite remember his name. Was it Aaron? Ashton? Alex? Anyway, he's kind of on the run for a crime committed a state over."

"Oh yeah, I think I heard of him. Is he kind of tall? Light brown hair parted down the middle like Prince Charming from Shrek? Young looking in the face but fit in the body? Hazel eyes?"

"... I don't remember all that information being released about him..."

"Yeah, I got to stop giving you hell because you're not the only one a part of weird Facebook groups."

"Well, some of these people can be pretty ballsy, so be cautious. Be safe. Call as soon as you get back."

"Yes, as soon as I get back. Bye, I love you."

"Bye, love you too."

As she hung up the phone, Julia heard a twig snap behind her. She had known she was being followed for a couple of blocks. He didn't need to know that though. With a racing heart and fidgety hands, Julia continued walking. She listened to his footsteps, soft but still audible, growing quicker after each block. Her heartbeat accelerated as well. She tried to give him a chance, an opportunity. Julia took left turns, and right turns, providing multiple chances for him to get away. All he had to do was walk in a different direction. He didn't take it. They never do.

Julia stopped at the corner of an empty park, next to a large bush. The street lights

were dim and darkness swallowed most of the structures. He stood 10 feet away from her. Like the description, his body was on the bigger side, or at least appeared to be under the large black and white varsity jacket he was wearing. His long hair fell under a black beanie and framed his boyish face. Smart, she thought. What a way to pick an outfit that draws little attention. His hands were in his pockets and his shoulders were tense. He may have been able to pass for innocent or non-threatening, except he was trying too hard to look normal. He flashed a toothy grin when they made eye contact. Stop trying so hard, she thought with disgust. Julia was not as big as him, but she didn't care. She could take him. She had the upper hand.

"Can I help you?" Julia asked.

"Uhhh... Yes, please. I'm not from here, he says back. I'm looking for insomnia cookies, but I think I might be a little lost." He scratches his head and lets out a half laugh. "Do you think you can help me?"

"Walk back in the direction you just

came from for about 4 blocks, then turn left. That road that leads you straight to their doorstep."

"I'm not very good with direction. Would you mind showing me? Do you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Actually, I do. Insomnia Cookies has a giant purple sign that lights up. Stevie Wonder couldn't miss it."

"Okay, down the street and turn left. I'll give it a shot. Thank you." He starts to turn around, but then looks back. Julia sighs in annoyance. "I don't think I got your name."

"Julia."

"Oh, that's pretty. I'm-"

"Adam?"

Adam's eyes narrow at her. "...yes," he says slowly. "How did you-"

"It's... embroidered... on your jacket."

He looks down. "Oh, I forgot that was there. Anyway, thank you again."

"My pleasure," Julia responds. Walk away. Walk away. Adam turned around and made like he was going to leave. Julia also turned around, except she didn't walk off.

She took her phone out of the canvas bag she was carrying and zipped it into the inside pocket of her puffer jacket, Just under the armpit, a weird but convenient place for a pocket for someone like her. It's a good spot for putting things you don't want to be found. Her baggy jeans concealed a small dagger that was tucked into her combat boots. The stainless steel blade was razor sharp inside of its metal case. She could almost feel it vibrating with anticipation—with excitement. A hysterical smile grew on her face as she closed her eyes. 3... 2... 1... she counted in her head, and a hand clamped over her mouth.

* * *

She struggled against the man's body, measuring his size and strength as he pulled her to the ground behind the bush. A punch to the nose came as little shock, but sent pain through her face anyway. She wiggled and kicked but to hardly any avail. One hand tightened around her throat while the other reached into the jacket pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

"Scream and I'll kill you, you little bitch!" He shoved the handkerchief into her mouth then flipped her over, pinning her arms behind her back. With the other hand, he reached around her to unfasten her belt after searching her jean pockets and finding nothing. He struggled for a minute but alas, it was undone. "Don't act like you don't like this. A vulnerable girl like yourself walking all alone at night, you are practically asking for it. That's what they tell you, right? You're begging!" While the one hand was occupied, Julia managed to wiggle one of her arms free. She elbowed him hard and the side, knocking the breath out of him. Her body rolls over just as the man goes in for another punch, but his hand collides with the hard ground instead. He yells. "I'm going to kill you!" Out of his pocket emerges a pocket knife.

It's a struggle to get from beneath him, but barely does she manage. Julia grabbed for her canvas bag that was just within reach. She pulls out her pepper spray and gets him in the eyes. Only a little, though.

She needs his full attention for her next actions. The man rubs at his eyes with bleeding knuckles. He falls back trying to tough out the burning sensation in his face. Julia falls on all fours, removing the gag and catching her breath. Waiting for the...

Like a bear being awakened mid hibernation, the man begins to rise. He is angry, his breath can be seen on the cool air coming out and large huffs and puffs. Slowly he stands on one foot, then the next, then... back to his knees he drops.

"I can't... I can't feel....," he takes a deep breath in. "What the hell? What did you do to me?"

"Your legs are just the beginning. The muscles in your arms and back should start feeling paralyzed here in a few seconds, too."

"You..."

"...bitch? Like I haven't heard that one before. You're not in much of a position to be insulting people, especially using weak insults like that."

The man fell forward, fingers twitching

and struggling to blink. Julia flips him onto his back grabbing his face and looking him straight in the eyes.

“That belt that you just unbuckled. Yeah, that front section was coated in aconite. I'm always impressed with how fast acting it is. Able to be absorbed through the skin. If you sit with it long enough, on top of being paralyzed, you'll start feeling nauseous and convulsing. You might choke to death on your own vomit, but if you are good, I might give you the antidote.” Her eyes scan the ground and land on the knife he had pulled out. It has the name engraved in it: Adam. The sound of howling pierced the air. This time, closer. Both Adam and Julia looked up. Well, Julia looked up. Adam could only move his eyes around. “Tsk tsk tsk, they probably smell your blood. Let's hope I get to you before they do.”

After digging around in her canvas bag, Julia pulled out and put on a pair of rubber gloves, then proceeded to remove her belt. It went into its own ziplock bag then back

into the canvas. She then reached over and picked some leaves off of the bush next to them. They have a distinct shape. Adam's eyes widened.

"I guess I don't have to explain what these are since it looks like you're familiar enough with them. The city was supposed to cut down this bush a long time ago, but they've never gotten around to doing so. Ivy's not on top of their priority list."

She proceeded to unbuckle his pants. His penis popped out, limp and shriveled in the cold air. Her hand gripped it firmly, poison ivy and all, and jerked it in an up-and-down motion. Up and down. Up and down. She threw a little twist in there for extra pizzazz. Adam tries to say something, but all he manages is a low gurgling moan.

"You know, the tongue is a muscle. It's better if you're quiet though. It helps me focus." She continued jerking him for probably a solid minute. His genitals turned a deep red color. He tried to fight the poison and move his body in protest, but failed, fingers twitching until they couldn't

anymore. "You know the heart is also a muscle. Is yours getting weaker yet?" More moaning. "This is what you wanted, right? Don't act like you don't like it."

When her arm got tired of this anti-climactic handjob, Julia moved back to the canvas bag. "Let's see what other goodies we have in here," she said, rummaging around. "Oh, I think this will do." She pulled out a bottle stopper. Not like one of those small corks. This one was long and made of glass. It had a cute glass rose at the top for grip. A tear fell from the corner of Adam's eyes. He tried to plead, but remained unintelligible. His noises were stopped when the stopper filled his mouth.

"Get it nice and wet for me, will you?" At the same time, Julia propped his knees up with his feet flat on the ground. "I'm sure there were plenty of girls before me. And if I wasn't me, I'm sure there would be plenty more after." She removed the stopper from his mouth. Again, whimpers are the only sound Adam could make.

"Shh shh shh," Julia whispers. "This will

only hurt a little. Well, that's a lie. You don't come off as a bottom so this will probably hurt a lot." If it hurt, she could hardly tell. Adam's eyes were zoned off. His chest heaved slowly, and foam and spit gathered in his mouth. "That's for all the ones before."

She dug around his pockets in search of his cell phone before finding it in the front left one. "You losers almost always leave evidence of your crimes quite literally at your fingertips, which is stupid unless you don't care about getting caught. Let's see if you are an idiot as well as a loser." She used his face to unlock the phone and scrolled through countless apps in search of anything that could be damning. As expected, there was a locked album in his photo apps. When his right thumb fingerprint didn't work in unlocking it, she thought hard. He had grabbed her from the left side and had his phone in his left pockets. "Ahhhhh, you must be a lefty. Cool, so am I." She used his left index finger and the app opened right up. Hundreds of

pictures of unwilling victims of various ages and in various places flooded the screen. "You are more disgusting than I thought. I'm really doing this world a favor. We'll just remove the lock from this album and leave the screen where it is easily accessible to whoever finds you. Let's also email these to a few contacts for insurance."

Next she pulled out a cheap plastic rain poncho. She slipped it over her clothes, pulled the hood up and drew it tight. Unable to move, and now unable to even whimper, Adam watched Julia's hand travel to her ankle and remove the dagger. His eyes wandered frantically, but there was no one around. He was alone. Vulnerable. "Don't bother searching for help. This park is always a ghost town at these hours. Landscapers and maintenance guys, or whoever they are, won't be here until a couple of hours after dawn. Now I know men like you can't stand to have their ego shattered by a woman. The thought of being bested by one probably makes you

want to die, huh? Well, today is your lucky day. You filthy disgusting pig. Following someone alone, at night, vulnerable. You were practically asking for this. You never know who's lurking in these streets at night. Oh, and there is no anecdote."

There was a dull wet sound as the blade ripped through Adams throat, followed by more gurgling. Blood oozed rapidly. It wasn't long before his head was submerged in a puddle of it. His eyes continued to wander for a few seconds before they finally stood still. His heaving chest heaved no more. Life left Adam's body and the streets became a little bit safer at that moment. "That was for all the ones who would have come after me," Julia said.

She rose from the ground and removed the plastic poncho, balling it up and tossing it in the trash a few feet away from them. There were also wet wipes in this canvas bag that she used to clean the immediate blood off her face and hands and the surface of her shoes. Her pant legs were wet with dew and grass-stained.

Tomorrow was laundry day, so there was no need to be very thorough. She pulled out her phone, perfectly protected by the cushion of her jacket. Five missed calls from Lola. It had been a rough night, but Lola would understand. She gathered her things and took one last look around. A pack of wolves were standing at the other end of the park. They held eye contact. Neither moved a muscle. Some would call this phenomenon telepathic communication because after a few moments, they both knew. Julia nodded her head and started walking down the sidewalk. The wolves crowded Adam's body. There were more wet noises, this time the sound of a delicious meal being devoured, before they were drowned out by her Nightlife playlist in her earbuds. "That's for ruining my night."

* * *

"Hey, I was just calling to let you know that I made it back to the dorm."

"WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG? I was about to call the police!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I got a little distracted. There were some animals looking for food, so I thought I'd stop and give them my leftovers."

"Jesus, how about you answer the phone next time? And stop feeding wild animals before one of them attacks you. They could be rabid."

"Dearly noted. Well, I'm back and I'm exhausted. I'm gonna go hop in the shower probably crash right after. See you tomorrow?"

"Yes! Lunch at The Airliner. They have a new 'specials' menu that I'm dying to try. Don't be late!"

"Wouldn't dream of it. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight!"

Julia hung up the phone and sat at her desk before a large metal box with a lock on it. It was never fun opening this box. It kept getting bigger. Inside was a vast selection of tokens—victim memorabilia, if you will. Nylon stockings and zip ties. Ropes and socks. Necklaces and watches. Pocket Knives. Lots of pocket knives. Big,

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small, plastic handles, steel and wooden ones. Some had writings on them. Some had blood. Julia dropped the latest knife into the collection before locking it back up and shoving the box back into its secret spot under the bed. It was a smaller knife, probably bought from a cheap gas station, with a dark wooden handle and a name carved into the side: Adam.