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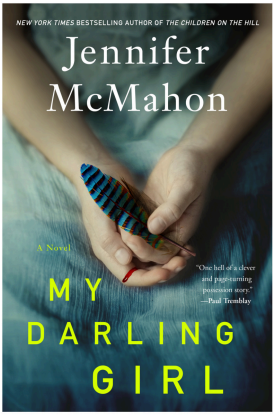

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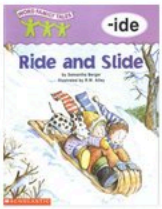

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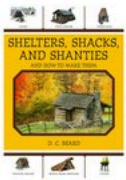

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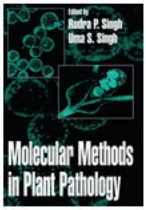

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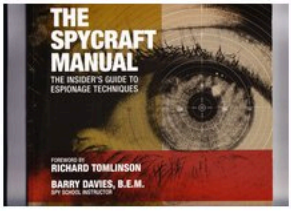

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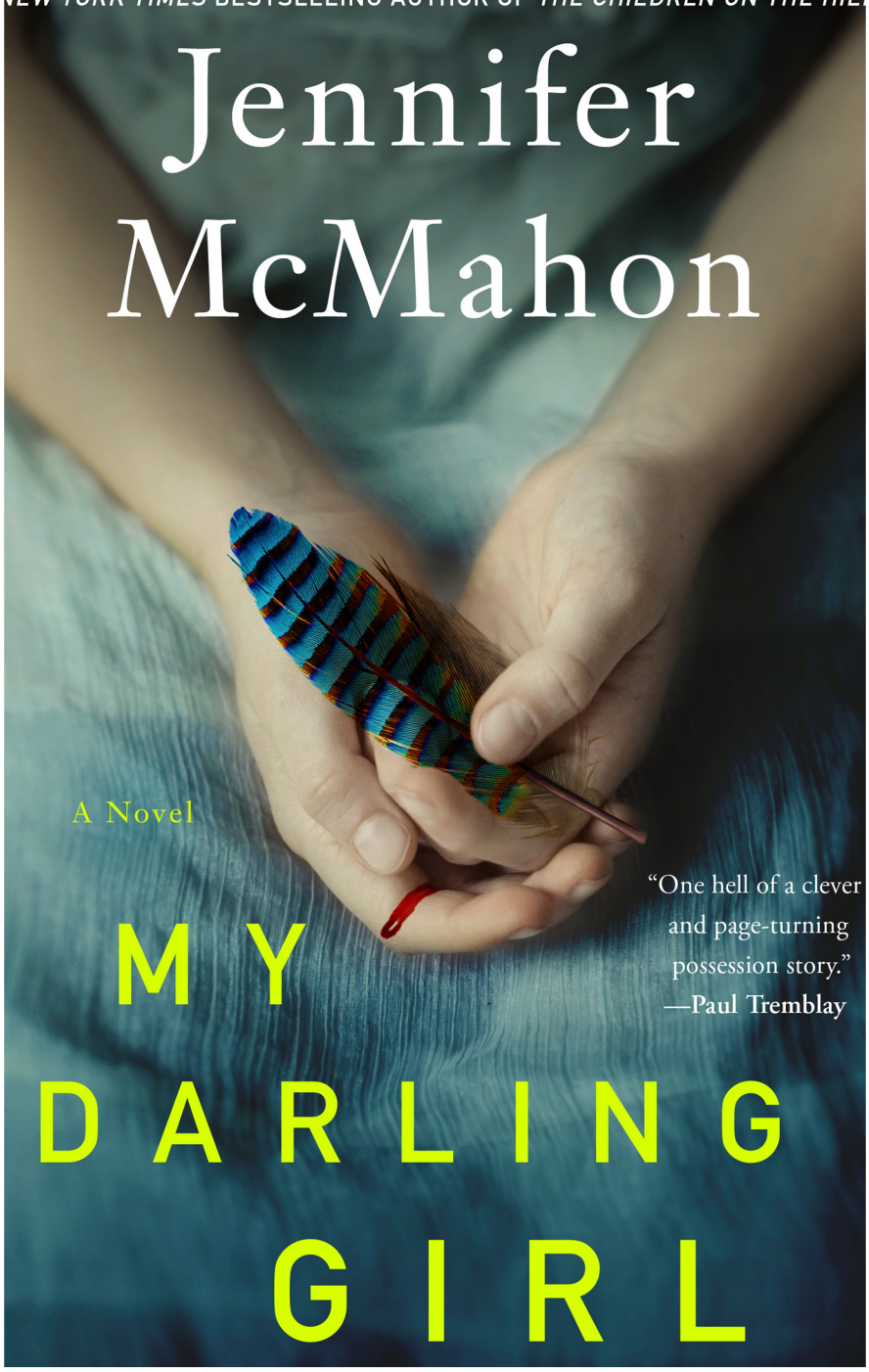

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MY DARLING GIRL

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MY DARLING GIRL

Jennifer McMahon



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For every mother and daughter who know just how complicated it can be

Thirty-seven years

LLIGATOR?" MY MOTHER whispered as she crept into my room, slipped und
quilt, cuddled up next to me on my twin bed. I was eight years old, a big gir
r mommy snuggles, but still, when she pressed her body against mine, I sighed
ntment and tucked myself tight against her.

e fit perfectly together, she and I. So perfectly that I wasn't sure where I ende
egan.

re you asleep, my love?" she asked. "Or are you playing possum?"

opened my eyes a tiny bit, enough to spy the numbers on the clock o
stand: 2:15.

y mother often worked late in her studio, sometimes stayed in there all
ing. But every so often she'd take a break, come into my room, wake me up, so
w off her latest work that she couldn't wait until morning. Some nights she'd
p and ask if I wanted to bake cookies with her, or drive to the all-night conven
for ice cream and root beer to make floats.

ow she ran her fingers through my hair, down my back, bumping them alon
by bones of my spine; my mother's fingers, I knew without looking, were st
paint. They smelled faintly of turpentine, like the rags in her studio—flammab
ent waiting to happen.

e put her face up next to mine, cheek to cheek. "I know you're awake," she sai
smelled it, distinct from the faint turpentine scent. Her breath was thick with
evergreen scent that reminded me of a forest of Christmas trees.

er fingers worked their way over the back of my nightgown, tracing shapes, m
s to spell out words. It was a game we played, she and I. A can-you-guess-wha
ng game.

elt the familiar letters:

-O-V-E-Y-O-U

miled, wriggled back closer to her.

do," she said, her words slurred in a way that made my stomach start to
re my perfect girl. Too perfect for this world. Sometimes I think..." Her words
and strange. "I think I should have spared you. Drowned you at birth, mayb
u suffer the things that are to come," she cooed into my hair.

y heart pounded so loud and hard that I was sure she could feel it, ringing li
bell.

e pulled me closer, squeezing all the air out of my chest.

ouldn't get away, even if I wanted to.

imagined I really was drowning, being pulled under, holding my breath,

ed it with salt water and birch smoke. I called my knife Descender, because an
s I conquered with it would descend back into the dark and shadowy place t
from.
elieved in magic then. I believed that everything had a spirit and energy that I
to and draw from, that rocks and plants could speak to me, that the geese
ead carried messages and were harbingers of things to come. And I believe
was good and there was evil and they were curled up around each other, intert
ick vines. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was which.
id other things to keep myself safe too. The ring of salt around my bed, the
Frances had given me for my sixth birthday tucked under my pillow besid
It was a children's Bible with pictures. Noah's ark was my favorite page: all
als boarding the big boat, two by two. I'd stare at the illustration, worrying o
he lions would eat the goats, the horses would trample the rabbits—and where
allest creatures, the millipedes and the worms? How would they be saved?
eld still, listening to my mother breathing.
and out. In and out.
I held still and played possum, she might just go away. Or pass out besid
e.
the morning, I'd tell myself it was just a dream. That I'd imagined her comin
om, whispering these things. It wouldn't feel real anymore in the light of day w
oking at her across the breakfast table. It would be impossible to believe thi
ened when my mother, all lit up with morning light coming through the ki
ow, smiled and asked if I would like raspberry jam for my toast (which she'd k
e crust off of, just the way I liked it), if my older brother, Ben, wanted extra p
r. If I dared ask her about her visit in the night, she'd call me a silly goose for m
ries. Then she might suggest some fun adventure for the day, like the time we
ain into the city just for chicken gyros, or the time we turned our living room i
and tried to get poor Lucky, our cat, to walk the tightrope.
t now I just concentrated on holding still, kept my eyes clamped shut.
magined I was dead. Buried deep underground, dirt in my mouth, roots tang
ir. I told myself that maybe my mother really did drown me when I was an inf
ned her sitting there on top of my grave, shoulders stooped under the weight of
orrow, talking down through six feet of earth to her dead baby girl in a rotten c
should have saved you from all of this," my mother whispered. I felt a warm,
rip onto my cheek.
e lifted the back of my pajama top.
old still, I told myself.
dead, I'm dead, I'm dead.
have a secret," my mother said, voice soft, confessional. "Do you want to know

magined it: something sharp and shiny about to be driven in at the soft
en my ribs, where it would be pushed all the way down to my heart and spli

e pressure intensified, as did the stabbing pain. I felt her tracing a design:
this time, but a circle, a spiral that went on and on, being etched right into my
thing with no beginning. No end.
it my lip to keep from crying out, and my eyes flew open.
ama, please," I whimpered.
ease stop. Please go away.
at's when I saw it: the shadow cast on the wall by my mother, backlit by the fi
light coming in from the window.
nly this was not my mother.
ot anymore.
y scream seemed to fill the whole room, the whole house, the whole universe.
eached under my pillow and grabbed the knife.

ONE



NGEL WAS IN a thousand tiny shards.

had slipped from my hand and shattered before I even realized what had happe

amn it," I muttered.

as precariously balanced at the very top of the stepladder in the corner of the

, where I'd been trying to hang it up. The clear glass angel hovered there i

ws every year at Christmastime, watching over us as we trimmed the tree, s

g, sat through sappy Christmas movies, then oohed and squealed as presents

d on Christmas Day; a strange, emotionless observer, a passive spy.

e truth was, I kind of hated the angel. I thought she was ugly (her eyes

us, insect-like) and more than a little bit creepy.

t I hadn't meant to smash her.

li? Hon? You okay?" Mark called from upstairs.

ine," I chirped back, climbing down from the ladder and picking up the l

ing piece: the angel's head. Her large pupilless eyes stared at me accusingly:

you do this to me?

ristmas music played from the holiday classics music channel on the televisio

oment, it was a saccharine-sweet version of "Let It Snow! Let It Snow!

!" Mark insisted on the music, saying it helped set the mood.

e wanted everything to be perfect when the girls got home from school: the bo

ents out, the tree ready to decorate, the house smelling of gingerbread co

tmas music playing. He'd even put a festive red Christmas ribbon on the poor

is was the day Mark most looked forward to all year—Decorating Day. He

December first off from work for it, as if it were an actual holiday. I bucked u

not to spoil it for him. Really, I did.

radition," Mark said again and again, telling me how important it was for the

e were creating memories that would last their lifetimes, traditions that wou

down to their children and their children's children.

oxie, our six-year-old black Lab, lay on her bed in the corner of the living

g somewhat dejected in her big red bow. She had lifted her head at the sound

crashing to the floor, then, seeing all was well, gave a sigh and settled back dow

et It Snow!" turned into "A Holly Jolly Christmas," and I couldn't help mys

tmas for the girls by letting the cheerful façade slip.

at pressure wasn't just from my husband. My best friend, Penny, who lived door, was almost as bad. Though she and her wife, Louise, called themselves ng, earth-goddess-loving pagans, she was right up there with Mark with the h . The two of them were thick as thieves this time of year. I loved them both, n't wait for our household's Yuletide spirit to wane. And, to add insult to inj ed a nice royalty check twice a year from my most successful project as an artis en's book I'd done three years ago, *Moxie Saves Christmas*. It was a simpl ful story about a homeless black Lab—modeled after our own Moxie, of cou showed a stressed-out, busy family the true meaning of Christmas. I'd illustra my woodcuts, simple black-and-white prints I then hand-colored in places. , which I'd printed myself in a limited number for family and friends, too e shared it. Word got out. Orders poured in. I had more copies printed, and be it, I was approached by a publisher who offered me more money than I woul ed possible—exponentially more than I'd ever made selling cards and prints at and galleries. At the urging of my more successful artist friends, I found an oon had a two-book contract: *Moxie Saves Christmas* and the follow-u ised, *Moxie Saves Halloween*. And just like that, with one simple picture boo nly supposed to be a last-minute gift for family and friends, I was perma to the holiday I couldn't stand.

olidays in general had not been cause for celebration when I was growing up me with anxiety and dread, which had sunk their roots down deep. At lea d book under contract featured a holiday I did like. And our older daughter, I f anything even remotely ghoulish, was excited by the Halloween book. At si ung goth wasn't especially easy to impress, so anything that brought us close thing to celebrate. Now all I had to do was finish the project.

e *Boston Globe* had come to do a feature on me two years ago, taking lots of p and Moxie in my studio and, of course, in front of the Christmas tree. Mar all-out decorating before they'd arrived. I cringed when I read the article—th eporter had described our house as *a magical winter wonderland complete ng sugarplums, antique glass ornaments, and pine garlands filling the house wi f the forest.*

ou must love Christmas," the reporter had said.

d I had clenched my teeth and given a big smile. "Why, yes," I lied. "Yes, I do." a gifted liar.

ark had started a goofy tradition of buying one special ornament each year tha sed to symbolize our lives in some way. That first year, it was a graduation cap. t was something new: baby's first Christmas when Izzy was born, a little ho ate when we bought the farmhouse, a stork when I was pregnant with Oli

When Mark asked if we could store some of the bigger pieces in my studio, I'
ot down. The small barn out back wasn't only my printmaking studio—it w
lace that was mine and mine alone. Penny was one of the few people I le
ut permission. The house rule was that no one was allowed to come distur
when I was working. The barn was a chaotic jumble of tables, the antique pri
I used, all my tools, tubes of ink, and drawing supplies. The walls were covered
d-up sketches and prints. The barn was my refuge. No Christmas decor
ed.

hat happened?" Mark asked now as he eyed the broken angel. His tone was sl
atory, as if I might have thrown the poor unsuspecting angel onto the floo
ed on it. His gaze moved from the ornament's head in my hand to the s
red across the floor like bits of crushed ice.

e had not once fallen for the ruse of me being the Christmas Queen. He saw
truly was and somehow loved me in spite of it.

was up on the ladder and it just slipped out of my hand." I gave him an apol
. "I'm sorry I'm such a klutz."

e angel had been from his childhood. When his parents died, Mark inherited
Christmas decorations (as if we really needed more), and he delighted in openi
each year, regaling me and the girls with the story behind each one.

hat angel came from a trip my parents took to Germany," he reminded me, lo
e might actually cry, blinking his long brown lashes.

e was wearing his day-off uniform: Levi's and a flannel button-down—re
, for Decorating Day. His face was a little flushed from his many trips up and
airs. He was nearly forty-five years old, and I'd known him since he was ninet
alf our lives. Sometimes I still saw traces of that skinny, wide-eyed boy I'd me
freshman year at UVM who had books of poetry stuffed in his coat pockets.

'm sorry," I said again.

d I was. Sorry I'd destroyed a memory of his happy childhood. That I was ru
tmas already.

y cell phone rang in the other room. It was plugged into the charger in the kit
etter grab that," I said, relieved to have an excuse to walk away. I hurried to a
bably Penny, calling to borrow something.

hen I grabbed my phone and glanced down at the screen, I wished I hadn't r
r it. Consoling Mark about the broken German angel was a thousand times
this. I contemplated not picking up, but I knew he'd call back, so it was best to
ith.

i, Paul," I said, trying to sound as chipper as possible. "How are you?"

i, Alison. I'm... okay." He didn't sound okay, though. He sounded tired. "And
e you and Mark and the girls are well?"