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# GHOSTWRITER

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# 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 time, even though your subconscious is constantly alert. Preparing for it. Waiting for it to surface.

“Just tell me,” I say.

“We’ve been contacted by Vincent Taylor’s team. You know, the horror writer? They want you to ghostwrite his next book.”

I barely feel the breeze dancing around my ankles and across my bare arms, my mind a swirling mess of confusion at the mention of that name. Vincent Taylor, my father. I haven’t spoken to him in at least twenty years, and no one in my current life knows we’re related. He’s the dark core I’ve walled off from the rest of my life.

Nicole hurries to fill my silence. “I know this isn’t your usual niche, but it’s a job, and they’re asking for you.”

“I’m not a novelist,” I finally say, my voice sounding higher than normal, and I clear my throat to cover my nerves. “There are plenty of people who could do that better than me.”

I hear Nicole shuffling things on her desk and imagine the view outside her window in Manhattan, the busy street below clogged with cars and pedestrians. “I know that, but they’re telling me he’s insisting on you.” Her voice drops an octave, curious. “I have to ask; how do you know him?”

I lower myself onto one of the iron chairs surrounding an outdoor table, vines of wisteria crisscrossing overhead. The breeze makes the single lamp suspended above me sway, a sigh of air winding up the canyon. “I don’t,” I say.

It isn’t a lie. I’ve worked hard to create a life separate from my father, living abroad until I could be certain the American media had forgotten Vincent Taylor ever had a daughter. I moved back in 2005 with dual citizenship and the last name of the man I was married to briefly in my twenties—Dumont. But it’s been even longer since I considered Vincent Taylor someone I knew.

After my return, I worked as a journalist, thinking I wanted to write about people like my father, the ones who bent the rules, played the system, and

took advantage of their privilege. But I hated it. Always fighting to get the story. Ambushing people at the park, the supermarket, on the phone, trying to get a quote they didn't want to give. Doing the very thing that had been done to me, until I'd managed to change my name and disappear.

I fell into ghostwriting by accident. A former grad-school classmate had become an editor at a major publishing house in New York. She'd reached out to me about a book project she had under contract—a memoir about an iconic film legend of the sixties. The ghostwriter had to drop off the project for undisclosed reasons. My friend was in a bind and needed someone who could hit their deadline. I said yes and discovered I was good at it.

Since then, I've been filling the world with books about strong women. The first Asian American woman to go into space. Politicians changing the landscape of women's rights. Scientists at the top of their fields. I love the anonymity of ghostwriting, the ability to slip into someone else's skin and inhabit their life just long enough to tell a good story. No one can see who I am or remember who my father is. I'm an invisible hand on the page instead of the name on the cover.

"Well, it's good money," Nicole continues. "He lives in Ojai, so probably not a bad gig either."

"Is there anything else?" I ask, suddenly desperate. A question I've posed too many times to count. In texts, emails, phone calls. But really what I'm asking is how, after so many years of success, could I have landed here? All I did that day was say out loud what everyone was thinking. John Calder, the man who sat center stage, whose most recent book about a politician-turned-convicted-sex-trafficker was offensive and misogynistic. "Is it just about the money, John, or is there a line you won't cross? A person you won't elevate, no matter the size of the advance?" I'd asked when it was my turn to talk.

I don't remember what the original question had been, the facilitator an esteemed reviewer from the *New York Times*. But I can still hear the collective inhalation from the audience, the way everyone's head swiveled to where I sat near the end of the stage, my chair a different shade of blue than everyone else's, as if my presence there had been an afterthought. And I knew in that moment I'd made a mistake. The facilitator had cleared his throat and said, "Tell us how you really feel, Ms. Dumont." The crowd had laughed, and the conversation had moved forward, but I'd known in that moment my words had been fatal. To publicly call out a man like John Calder, with his long list of bestsellers and his connections to influential circles ranging from politics to the entertainment industry, regardless of the depraved topics he introduced into public discourse, was an error Nicole couldn't make disappear.

The publisher of the book I'd been promoting asked me to release an apology. Instead, I went on a social media rant about the misogyny in publishing that elevated men like John Calder. That paid them twice as much as their female counterparts, with larger marketing budgets that exploded their sales numbers. Which, in turn, earned them even bigger advances. I was exhausted by the amount of work it took just to come in second. And angry as well that talent mattered so little to the people on top. The last four posts on that thread sealed my fate:

(7/10) While the rest of us are out here trying to do the hard work of elevating marginalized voices, telling stories that matter to the collective good, John Calder has decided to go a different route.

(8/10) Perhaps like attracts like. You are the company you keep, and John Calder keeps the company of some of the most vile and corrupt individuals in our society.

(9/10) I'm talking about the pedophile politician. The CEO who is also a white supremacist. The judge who gives rape a pass so that it won't "ruin a young man's life."

(10/10) It baffles me that publishers want to support people like this. Who think John Calder is enough of a talent to give him money and a platform to do it.

Because of that, John Calder went on a national media blitz decrying my attempt to cancel him. Then he sued, claiming that he lost out on two book deals because of me, the subjects deciding to go in a less controversial direction. The trial was held in the state where the literary festival had been, and I found myself in front of a judge just itching to put a mouthy woman in her place. He slapped a prohibitive fine on me, \$500,000, and advised me to be mindful of my words. To not let myself get so emotional. To *calm down*.

And while people were quietly supportive, that didn't extend to recommending me for ghostwriting jobs. It wasn't as simple as changing my name and writing under an alias. In this genre, you needed a proven track record to get the big books, and mine had been one of the best. Until it wasn't.

"You know I've made every call," Nicole says now. "Tried to cash in on every favor. We just have to wait this out."

To be honest, it's a miracle she hasn't dropped me as a client.

I want to say no to this project. I have to say no—not just because I've worked hard to completely separate myself from my family and the trauma that sits at the center of it, but also because I won't allow myself to be manipulated by my father. Because there's no way this is about a job.

"I thought Vincent Taylor retired a few years ago," I say.

“Men like him love to stage a comeback,” Nicole says. “However, I got the sense, talking with his team, that it’s not going very well. They’ve hit some snags, and if this book can be delivered on their timeline, without any more problems, they might be willing to work with us on other projects.” She pauses for emphasis. “This could open the door for you again.”

I walk to the edge of the patio, where a handmade railing carved from an old oak tree divides my property from the national forest land below it, and stare into the cloudy distance. “What kind of snags?” I ask. “What’s the problem?”

“They were light on details. There will be full disclosure once you agree.”

A hawk circles overhead, and I feel a sudden wariness, an affinity with the invisible creature it’s hunting. “How much?” I finally ask.

“They’re starting at two fifty. I can probably get them up since he’s asking for you specifically. There’s also a royalty split that, if the book earns out—and there’s no reason to think that it won’t—will be a solid source of income for you.” She pauses. “You might not have to sell your house.”

The hawk dives and I turn away from the view and back toward my house, remembering the couple who’d toured it just days ago, gliding up the driveway in their silent Tesla, the husband’s sockless feet in expensive Italian loafers, the wife clutching her Birkin bag to her chest as they navigated the dirt path winding toward the wooden stairs that led up to the front door. I’d smiled at them on my way out, knowing I didn’t want to subject myself to the opinions of potential buyers, but the woman’s voice floated down to me from above as I sat in my car with the windows down. “This is a teardown,” she’d said, disdain dripping through her words.

And later that evening, when my real estate agent called to tell me they weren’t going to make an offer, she’d suggested dropping the price. Again.



“Fine,” I tell Nicole now, knowing I’ll regret it. Knowing this job will cost me in ways I can’t even begin to imagine.

“I’ll let them know and circle back with full details.”

“How soon does he want to start?” I ask.

“They’re in a rush, so I’m thinking it’ll move quickly. Plan to head up there by the end of the week.”

We disconnect, and I look back toward the canyon, no sign of the hawk or its prey. I try to think about this not just as an opportunity, but a necessity. My father used to always say *No regrets, no looking back*. I make a promise to not let myself get sucked into whatever plan he’s got for me. Because this book has to be a ruse; my father has been churning out novels for decades, and he certainly doesn’t need my help to do it. I will view it as a necessary evil to move past this phase of my life—to stave off the overdraft notices arriving almost daily on my phone. To pay what I owe to both John Calder and my attorney. And perhaps to also get some closure with a man who has been virtually unknown to me my entire life.

Regardless, at age forty-four and after nearly a three-decade absence, I’m finally going back home.