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All the Little Pieces

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Published by HarperCollins

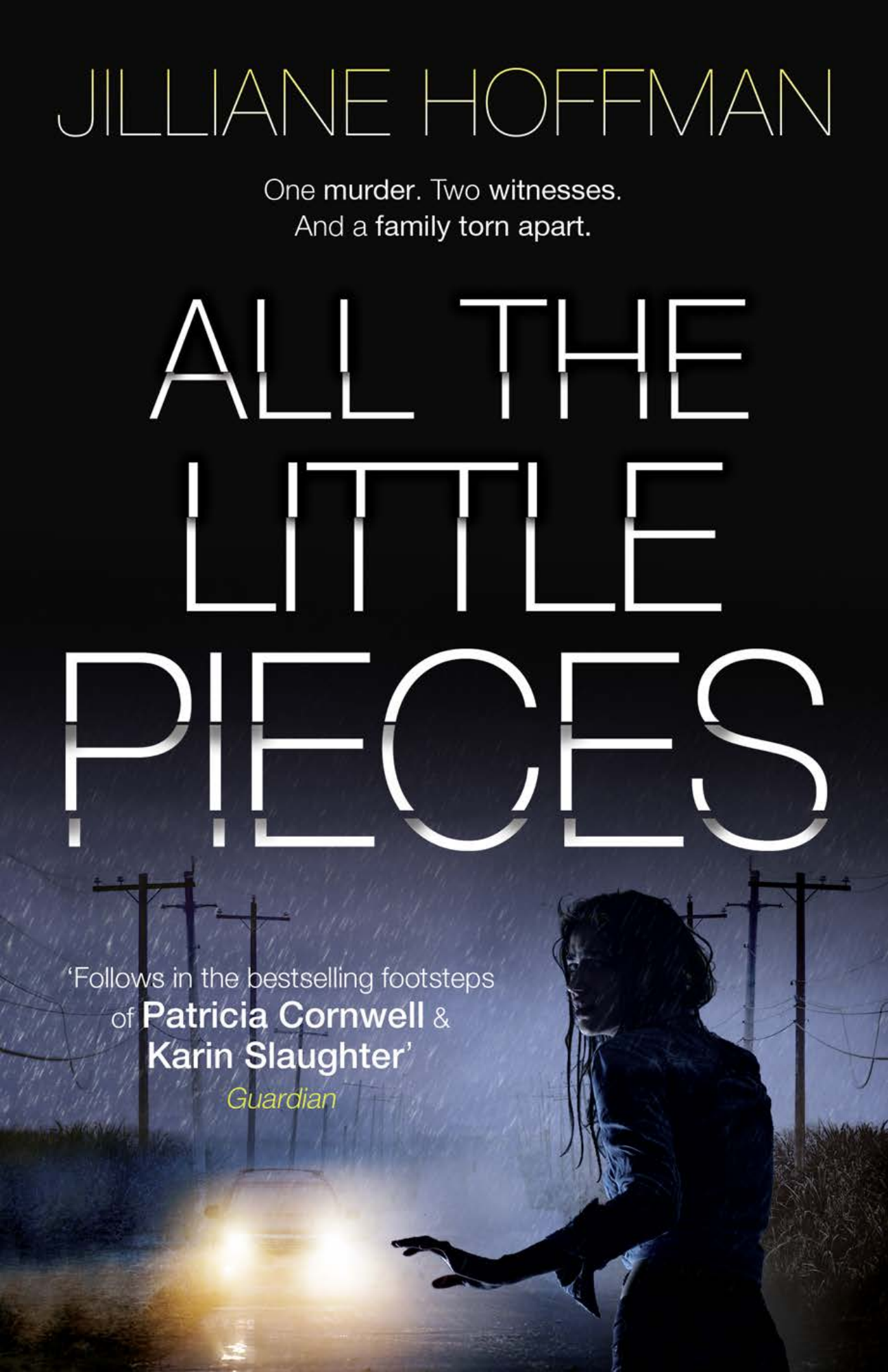
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JILLIANE HOFFMAN

One **murder**. Two **witnesses**.
And a **family torn apart**.

ALL THE LITTLE PIECES



'Follows in the bestselling footsteps of **Patricia Cornwell** & **Karin Slaughter**'
Guardian

JILLIANE HOFFMAN

ALL THE LITTLE PIECES



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2015
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

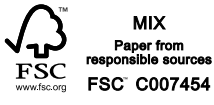
ISBN: 9780007311705

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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
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Set in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For Rich,
as always, for so many reasons.

And for Pamela Musso Costidis,
a courageous, great friend.

PART ONE

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

Elie Wiesel, *U.S. News and World Report*,
October 27, 1986

1

The rainy night air smelled toxic – burnt and bitter – like a house fire a day after being put out, its charred remains smoldering in puddles full of water and chemicals. The thick taste coated her throat. No matter if she spit or swallowed, there was no getting rid of it.

The girl stumbled through the maze of sugar cane stalks. With no moon, stars or light to guide her it was hard to make out even the hand in front of her face. She was barefoot and the muddy, gloppy soil was laden with chunks of limestone that, when stepped on, felt like she had walked on a hidden land mine because of the glass that was still stuck in her foot. The pain would explode and travel like a lightning rod through her whole body, setting even her teeth on fire. As soon as she could stop running she'd try to feel around and pick the pieces out. But that time wasn't now. With outstretched hands, she staggered down the row of thick stalks that towered over her small frame, hoping they would brace her should she run into something.

Or someone.

The terrifying thought made her shake. That, and she'd never been so cold before. She'd grown up in Florida. It never got cold here, even when some front blew in from Canada

and all the old people and news anchors started yelling it was freezing and that the orange trees were gonna die. But she was completely soaked and the crazy-assed wind from the crazy-assed storm ripped right through her. It raced through the cane stalks making them whistle so piercingly they sounded like they were screaming. She bit her tongue to stop her teeth from chattering.

It was hard not to yell out for help. There could be someone or something out there beyond all this fucking cane. Yards away, maybe. A home. A gas station. A road that led out of here, wherever here was. Somewhere nearby, cane fields had been torched and harvested. That's what she was smelling and tasting in her throat – burnt sugar cane. Maybe there were people out here. Maybe farmers or migrant workers living in tents or shanties, waiting for the storm to pass and first light to come so they could torch these fields. Maybe someone could hear her, help her, take her in.

Hide her.

But even as she thought it, she realized that was fool thinking. Chances were there weren't. Chances were she was in the middle of nowhere with no one around for miles. Chances were she was out here on her own and the best thing she could do was to take cover in the stalks until the sun came up and those migrant workers showed up by the truckload. Chances were that the only people who would hear her cries for help were the very men hunting her. The faces of loved ones flashed before her: Sweet baby Ginger who still wanted her bottle at night even though everyone said she was too old for one. Luis. He was a bastard – a jealous, cheating fuck. He'd broken her heart more times than she could count. Oh God, how she loved him. Always had, always would. Mami, Papi, Abu, Cindy, Alonzo, Quina Mae. She pushed the faces out of her head. To think of them meant she was giving up and saying her mental goodbyes.

No! No! Pull yourself together!

She wiped her eyes and sucked in the sobs. Those men were out there. They would hear her whimpers and hone in on them like vultures listening for the struggling breaths of a dying creature. Right now they were circling the fields she was lost in, trying to GPS her location, swoop in and pick over what was left of her. She tried to focus instead on the scent of pine. Somewhere beyond the stench of wet, burnt cane was the crisp smell of slash pine trees. It was the scent of hope. She was going to make her way toward that. No more mental goodbyes: she was a survivor. So far she had made it farther than the others.

She was still alive.

The cane stalks attacked her face and hands like accomplices as she forced her way through them. Once she hit the clearing where the cane had been burned she could run. Damn the fear and the pain in her foot, she'd run. Of course, she would be exposed in a clearing. The tears started again.

Maybe they were waiting for her to do just that, to spare them the trouble of ferreting her out. Those men – those Crazies – they likely knew these fields. That's why they'd brought her here. They knew which ways led in, which ways led out. And that place – that horrible, horrible place they had taken her to. It was surrounded by so much cane, stalks had started to grow inside.

You can't stay here. Choose! What would be worse? Hiding in a cane field, only to be found and taken back to . . . that place? Or making a run for it? Making a run for one of those homes that might be out there beyond the stalks?

Better to run. Better to go down fighting. Luis would tell her that, for sure. God, she wished he were here. He would cut those motherfuckers into a million little pieces and then force-feed them to each—

'Here, kitty, kitty.'

Her heart stopped. He was behind her. He was gaining on her. Her head darted around. *Where the hell was he?*

She dropped to her hands and knees, crawling into the stalks. She felt a searing pain shoot up her leg, the one with the glass in it. She reached down and felt the open flap of skin on her heel, the warmth of her own blood as it ran out through her fingers. The cane stalks were razor sharp. She bit into her hand and tried to shake off the pain. The bad thoughts returned. The faces of her family reappeared.

At least this way the police will know I was here. They'll see all the blood and test it and know I was here. I won't have just disappeared. No one will think I left town, that I ran away from Ginger . . .

But even as she thought it, she knew it was ridiculous. She could completely bleed out in this field and no one would ever know she'd been here, crawling in the dark, trying to hide from her killers. The rain would wash it all away. The workers who tended these fields would step on her grave and, if the Crazies didn't leave her body where they killed her, no one would ever know. And if they didn't kill her here, if they dragged her away to that place to do all the horrible things they had promised to do to her, there would be nothing left in this spot to find at all. Or they could leave her here, chopped into bits and pieces and sprinkled all over, like seasoning, knowing that these fields would soon be incinerated. After the inferno there would be nothing left to find but ash. If the migrants ever did stumble on what remained of her, and if crime scene people like the ones in *CSI* could actually identify ash and bone fragments, then maybe, just maybe, some detective might try and come out here one day and piece together her final moments. He might try to figure out exactly what had happened here. She bit harder into her hand. But that was impossible. Because no one could ever imagine the moment she was in right now. The horror of it was unimaginable.

'You know why the dog chases the cat?'

He was feet away. She could hear him even over the

screaming of the cane stalks. He knew she could hear him, too – he was yelling, but his swampy Southern voice was calm.

Was she crawling toward him or away from him?

''Cause it runs. If the cat don't run, then the dog don't chase. The cat and dog – they can be friends, darlin'. But if that cat, well, if she runs . . .' His voice trailed off. 'See, all you gonna do, darlin', is piss off the fucking dog – get him all tired and shit. So come on out, kitty, before you piss me off. It's just gonna hurt more, bitch.'

The light sliced through the stalks – up, down, over, across. She stopped crawling and tucked herself into a tight, tight ball.

'Maybe that cat's hiding right now. Praying for morning and some Hondurans to come save her.'

The light crossed over to the row directly across from her. She cast her eyes to the ground, so the light wouldn't catch on the whites of her eyes. In her fist she clenched the stalk.

'That would be fool thinking.'

His work boots squished in the mud.

'Dogs have a great sense of smell. There ain't nowhere that cat can hide, 'cause that dog can smell pussy. Oh yeah. And when that dog finds her, well, he's gonna tear her limb from limb for making him work so hard.' He started to chuckle. It bloomed into a frenzied, maniacal laugh.

She put her hands over her ears.

'You seen her yet?' It was another voice. It was the second Crazy, speaking over a walkie-talkie.

'Not yet, brother,' replied the swamp voice. 'But this here's the fun part. This is when we get to find her and teach her why it wasn't a smart move to leave us none. Whoo-wee, we're gonna have us a good time!'

She covered her mouth so he wouldn't see her breath. A loud rumble of thunder sounded.

'Go over by the tractor,' said the swamp voice into the

walkie-talkie. 'Make sure she don't get past that and onto the road. We're fucked if we lose her to the road.'

Another rumble. She looked up at the sky. *Please, please, please – no lightning. It'll light up this field like the second coming of Christ . . .*

The swamp-voiced Crazy sniffed at the air. 'But I'm telling ya, I don't think she's got that far, 'cause there's pussy around here somewhere.'

Hot tears ran down her filthy face. There were so many things left to do in life. So many times she'd wished she could start over, because she'd screwed up so many times. Always the big disappointment.

'Dino trackers still find dino footprints, stuck there in mud. Miiillllions of years old . . .'

She rocked back and forth, her body tucked into a tight ball, her hands over her ears. Every day she'd tell herself she'd turn her life around – tomorrow. Tomorrow always came and went. Now she knew she would do it. For Ginger, who deserved a better momma. For her own mom, who worried so much about the way she lived her life. If she ever saw another tomorrow . . .

The light was right in front of her, now, inches from her foot, sporadically slicing through the stalks like the beams of a searchlight would dissect the night sky at the club where she danced. 'How long you think a footprint stays 'round, darlin', before rain runs it off?' It slithered off into the cane, brushing her jeans. The work boots plodded away. *Squish. Squish. Squish.*

Then he turned, ran back real quick, dropped to his knees, and stuck the flashlight in her face. 'Hey there bitch!' he cooed. 'I got her!' he yelled out triumphantly.

Not yet. There was still tomorrow. She threw a fistful of mud and rock at his face and stuck the cane into his eyes. When he yelped in surprise, she leapt up and kicked him in the face as hard as she could. She wished she were wearing

her boots. Those would've taken out a few teeth. Then she could stomp on his ugly cracker head with her stilettos and pop those bloodshot, lecherous eyes. But they'd taken her boots.

He fell to the ground and she kicked him in the face two more times before bolting into the stalks.

'Bitch!' he howled.

The clearing was up ahead, she could feel it. The pine was strong. There was still hope. And then, like a miracle, lightning lit the sky, illuminating the path that had been cut through the cane stalks. Jesus had turned on the lights at the right moment and showed her the way out.

'She's on the run!' she heard the swamp-voiced Crazy scream. 'Fuck me, motherfucker, she stuck me! I can't see nothing! You better get the car! Don't let her get into town!'