



Playing Dead: A Novel

By Julia Heaberlin

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“Dear Tommie: Have you ever wondered about who you are?”

The letter that turns Tommie McCloud’s world upside down arrives from a stranger only days after her father’s death. The woman who wrote it claims that Tommie is her daughter—and that she was kidnapped as a baby thirty-one years ago.

Tommie wants to believe it’s all a hoax, but suddenly a girl who grew up on a Texas ranch finds herself linked to a horrific past: the slaughter of a family in Chicago, the murder of an Oklahoma beauty queen, and the kidnapping of a little girl named Adriana. Tommie races along a twisting, nightmarish path while an unseen stalker is determined to keep old secrets locked inside the dementia-battered brain of the woman who Tommie always thought was her real mother. With everything she has ever believed in question, and no one she can trust, Tommie must discover the truth about the girl who vanished—and the very real threats that still remain.

“[Julia Heaberlin’s] voice is pitch perfect, and her story of one woman’s fierce struggle to reconcile her past with her present is gripping and powerful. An outstanding debut.”—Carla Buckley, author of *Invisible*

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Playing Dead: A Novel By Julia Heaberlin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #91558 in eBooks
- Published on: 2012-05-29
- Released on: 2012-05-29
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

“In a word, this book is fun.” —*Fort-Worth Star-Telegram*

“Tommie is a smart, sassy, loving, and doggedly persistent narrator in this fast-moving mystery that occasionally tugs at the heartstrings. A promising debut.”

—*Booklist*

“Tommie McCloud is the kind of character that every female reader ends up wanting as a sister of best friend—a friend of passionate loyalties, a no-nonsense woman who doesn’t possess the insincerity gene, a not-too-girly Texas spitfire...feverishly compelling....Heaberlin tells the story with whip-smart dialogue, an insistent pace and keen wit; it’s irresistible enough that I sped through all 300-plus pages in one sitting.”

—*Dallas Morning News*

"A terrific debut . . . Like the Chicken-Fried Steak that its characters love, *Playing Dead* combines Texas and Noir in unexpectedly wonderful ways, with a refreshingly real heroine and a plot that moves and twists with the unpredictability of a rodeo bull."

—Susanna Kearsley, author of *The Rose Garden*

“A debut crime novel from an author with a very promising future....Heaberlin can certainly keep the suspense going and dangled me like a fish on a line....Heaberlin’s debut is excellently written with a great mix of intrigue, murder and mystery to keep the reader determined to see what happens on Tommie’s journey.” —*Crimesquad*

“As Heaberlin leads the reader through several complex threads, her fast-paced narrative rarely flags.”

—*Detroit News*

“Impressive....her debut’s most striking feature is Tommie’s narrative voice, which is so winning and vivacious.” —*Sunday Times* (UK)

About the Author

Julia Heaberlin was a journalist for more than twenty years for such newspapers as the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* and the *Detroit News*. Her novels include *Playing Dead* and *Lie Still*. She lives with her family in Texas.

Madeleine Lambert received her MFA in acting from Brown University and Trinity Rep. Her performances at Trinity Repertory Company include Shelby in *Steel Magnolias* and Belle in *A Christmas Carol*. Madeleine graduated with honors from Duke University with majors in theater studies and English and a minor in French. She attended the School at Steppenwolf in Chicago.

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CHAPTER 1

Despite its name, Ponder, Texas, pop. 1,101, isn’t a very good place to think. Four months out of the year,

it's too damn hot to think.

It is a good place to get lost. That's what my mother did thirty-two years ago. The fact that she successfully hid this from almost everyone who loved her makes her a pretty good liar. I'm not sure what it says about me.

When I was a little girl, my grandmother would tell my fortune to keep me still. I vividly remember one August day when the red line on the back porch thermometer crept up to 108. Sweat dribbled down the backs of my knees, a thin cotton sundress pressed wet against my back. My legs swung back and forth under the kitchen table, too short to reach the floor. Granny snapped beans in a soothing rhythm. I stared at a tall glass pitcher of iced tea that floated with mint leaves and quarter moons of lemon, wishing I could jump in. Granny promised a storm coming from Oklahoma would cool things off by dinner. The fan kept blowing the cards off the table and I kept slapping them down, giggling.

The fortune is long forgotten, but I can still hear the anguished joy of my mother playing a Bach concerto in the background.

Two years later, on the worst day of my life, what I remember most is being cold. Granny and I stood in a darkened funeral parlor, the window air conditioner blowing up goose bumps on my arms. Cracks of September sunlight tried to push in around the shades. It was at least ninety degrees outside, but I wanted my winter coat. I wanted to lie down and never wake up. Granny gripped my hand tighter, as if she could hear my thoughts. Merle Haggard blared from a passing pickup truck and faded away. I could hear my mother crying from another room.

That's how I remember Mama—present but absent.

I'm not like that. People know when I'm around.

I've been told that I have a strange name for a girl, that I'm nosy, that I'm too delicate to carry a gun. The first two are true.

I've been told that it's weird to love both Johnny Cash and Vivaldi, that I'm way too white for a Texan and too skinny for a fast food junkie, that my hair is long and straight enough to hang a cat, that I look more like a New York City ballet dancer than a former champion roper. (In Texas, New York City is never a complimentary adjective.)

I've been told that my sister, Sadie, and I shouldn't have beaten up Jimmy Walker in fifth grade because he is still whining about it to a therapist.

I've been told that growing up in Ponder must have been an idyllic childhood, picket fence and all. I tell those people I'm more familiar with barbed wire and have the scars on my belly to prove it.

I learned early that nothing is what it seems. The nice butcher at the Piggly Wiggly who saved bones for our dogs beat his wife. The homecoming queen's little sister was really the daughter she had in seventh grade. That's the way life was.

In a place like Ponder, everyone knew your secrets. At least, that's what I thought before. I never pictured my mother, the legendary pianist of the First Baptist Church of Ponder, as a woman with something to hide. I never dreamed that opening a stranger's letter would be pulling a loose thread that would unravel everything. That, one day, I'd scrutinize every memory for the truth.

The letter is five days old and I have read it forty-two times. It is pink and smells like the perfume of a

woman I don't know. It arrived on a Wednesday, right to Daddy's office, sandwiched between a plea from Doctors Without Borders and a brochure on a new exhibit at the Amon Carter Museum.

Daddy's secretary, Melva, a former teacher and widow on the upside of her sixties, picked the envelope out of the stack as something I needed to see. Personal, she said. Not spit out by a computer. A sympathy card, perhaps, because that was one of the few things people still felt obligated to write by hand.

When I opened it and read the careful feminine scrawl, I felt the earth shift. The tremor started low, in my toes, and worked its way up, although I can't say why the letter had such an instant effect on me.

The odds were that the woman who wrote this was a scam artist. Or simply had the wrong girl. The wrong Tommie McCloud, spelled with an ie.

Each of the forty-two times I read the letter, I wanted to hop in my pickup and go home to Mama, even though Mama isn't there and home is now an empty ranch house with faded flowered sheets covering the furniture like an indoor meadow.

But home is also endless rolling land, shimmering heat, sweet memories that thrum in the air with the cicadas. Home pulls at me like a magnet. Even when my body is hundreds of miles away, my soul stays behind, clinging to the live oak by the cement pond where I learned to dog paddle.

They say that Lyndon Johnson's shoulders rolled back and he relaxed as soon as he could see his ranchland stretching out below Air Force One. My Granny called LBJ an egotistical lunatic, but that profound connection he had with a patch of earth makes him OK in my book. I've tried to leave for good, to beat a new path, but I have been safest and happiest on Elizabeth Ranch, where my great-great-grandfather was born, where I grew up.

Less kind people would say I never grew up. They call me a runaway.

If anyone asked, I would describe myself as temporarily off-course ever since eight hundred pounds of steer stomped on my wrist fourteen years ago in a rodeo arena in Lubbock, Texas, knocking me from the pedestal of my saddle into mortality. It took two seconds for Black Diablo to crush both twelve bones in my forearm and wrist and any wispy thoughts in my mother's head of tearing me away from the rodeo and turning me into a concert pianist. My fingers never worked the same again.

Goodbye to getting a master's at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. Goodbye to my collegiate rodeo competitions, because a year of physical therapy later, I couldn't swing a rope. I had the yips, like a catcher who suddenly can't throw a ball straight back to the mound after doing it thousands of times.

What else did I know besides Bach and rodeo? When the shattered bones healed, I left home, raw and angry, not sure whose dreams I'd been living. I spent a year in Europe as a backpacking, hostel-living cliché. Four years at the University of Texas getting a degree in child psychology, three more working toward my Ph.D. at Rice. Five years in Wyoming at Halo Ranch, a nonprofit that uses horses to coax sick and emotionally distraught kids back to life, lured there by an internship and an irresistible fellow Ph.D. candidate. Somewhere in there, I fell out of infatuation with him and back in love with horses.

Then, two weeks ago, Daddy died, and I came home to Ponder for good. I hadn't said it out loud, but I knew I wouldn't leave again.

My eyes close for a second and I can picture every word on the perfumed pink page in front of me, the spidery scrawl that is setting everything in motion.

Dear Tommie, it begins. Have you ever wondered about who you are?

Always, I tell myself. Always. But not in the way you think.

I'm looking for my daughter who was kidnapped July 15, 1981, when she was only one.

I do the simple math one more time. She was kidnapped thirty-one years ago and I am 32 years old.

Her name is Adriana Marchetti.

She's Italian, I think. I am pale. I freckle in the sun. My hair is untouched blond.

I've spent most of my life searching for you. I believe you are my daughter.

I want to shout at this invisible woman. My mother never lies. Never. It was the one thing that disappointed her the most, if her girls lied to her. And my father? Even less likely.

But I cannot lie to myself now. There was another letter to consider. This one had shown up at the ranch in Wyoming. An official one, with my name, Tommie Anne McCloud, behind the envelope's waxy window.

The envelope contained a Social Security card with a brand-new number and a letter informing me that an extensive internal review of the past fifty years of Social Security numbers unearthed hundreds of clerking errors. The first three digits of my number did not reflect where my birth certificate said I was born.

Take this number instead.

No big deal. To them. But that number had been a part of me all my life. I was attached to it, like I was to my hair, my childhood cat Clyde, and the date of my birth. It was one of the few numbers I could spit out automatically, packed in my brain with all of the other passwords and security codes required for membership in the twenty-first century. It had been a nightmare to change it on my passport, insurance cards, credit cards.

But I'd never called to ask any questions. Why would I?

That letter was somewhere in a landfill by now. Daddy's Mac in front of me glowed, encouraging. I typed "Social Security Administration" into Google, found an 800 number, punched it into my cell, and spent ten minutes bouncing around telephone menus that had no options for grieving, emotionally distraught daughters possibly kidnapped more than thirty years ago. I yelled "Representative" into the phone until the fake voice gave up and transferred me to a live woman, who introduced herself as Crystal.

"I got a Social Security card with a new number in the mail a couple of years ago," I told Crystal. "My name is Tommie McCloud."

"Uh-huh. Hundreds of people did. Is there a problem?"

"I just wondered...why? Where did the first three digits indicate I was born?" As I asked this, it occurred to me that I probably could have Googled this kind of information and saved a lot of time.

"You're just asking now? Never mind. Give me the first three digits of the old number and the new number." I recited them obediently and she came back on the line a few seconds later. She had probably Googled it.

"Chicago, Illinois."

“I was born at a hospital in Fort Worth.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her tone was overly patient. “That is why you got a new card.”

“This has been a huge hassle,” I said, irritated with her patronizing air, wanting to be distracted from the reason I called her in the first place.

“Ma’am, do you have any issues I can specifically help you with now? This is in response to our nation’s heightened vulnerability to security threats and identity fraud. Do you not want a safe nation?”

Ah, the twenty-first-century tactic: Switch the blame right back to the consumer. Yesterday, a representative for the phone company told me it would take a month to set up phone and internet service at the Ponder ranch. When I sputtered a protest, he asked whether I really thought I deserved to be put ahead of other consumers in line. And was I not aware of Texas flooding? I couldn’t dignify that with an answer. The black earth in Daddy’s fields was cracking from the heat. I pictured the phone rep shutting his eyes and stabbing his finger pin-the-tail-on-the donkey style at a list titled Natural disasters: Excuses they might fall for.

“You’re attacking my patriotism?” I asked Crystal, thinking that wasn’t her real name or accent, that her own dry, un-American ass was probably sitting in India. “Are you reading from a script? Because I’d recommend you get a new script.”

“I’m going to put you down as a customer hang-up,” she said.

“What?”

Silence on the other end. Crystal was gone.

It didn’t matter. I couldn’t avoid it any longer.

Rosalina Marchetti’s letter was clear on this fact. Her daughter, Adriana, had been kidnapped in Chicago, Illinois. Rosalina wanted me to travel there sometime in the next few weeks, all on her dime.

Did she know that my father had just died? Wasn’t that how these scammers worked, with a cold eye on the obituaries, one of the few places where unusual names are usually spelled correctly? Because that’s the thing: Rarely did anyone spell my name right who wasn’t a blood relation, and half of them didn’t, either.

I read the letter for the forty-third time and it’s like I’m twelve years old again sitting in the corner of a horse stall with a flashlight and a terrifying book, frantic to warn the heroine of terrible peril but secretly knowing I can protect her for a day, for months, for years, forever, by simply slamming the book shut. Ending her story in the middle.

I stare at Rosalina Marchetti’s signature. It sweeps arrogantly across the right bottom half of the page, tall and loopy. Under her name, like an afterthought, she had scribbled:

And the angels cried.

CHAPTER 2

Are you OK, Tommie?”

A familiar gravelly voice. A voice like my father’s, worn raw by smoke and sawdust. I lifted my head from the pile of papers. If I squinted, I could pretend he was Daddy. Tall, angular lines, a fifteen dollar haircut

from Joe, jeans and boots that had met some cows, a face like the Texas earth, wrecked by sun and drought and cigarettes. The damn cigarettes. I pushed away the image of Daddy at the end, with his oxygen tank at his side like a loyal pet.

“Wade. Hi.” I finished pulling my uncooperative hair through an old rubber band I’d found in the drawer and flipped it down my back. “I’m awake. Just unsure where to begin with Daddy’s papers.” I wanted to say that the whole room made me physically ache.

Instead, I spread my arms to encompass the scarred oak desk in front of me, slotted and pegged together like a master puzzle by a cowboy more than two hundred years ago. Not a single metal nail. I took naps on top when I was three. Daddy bragged that it required five men to get the desk through the door.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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