

Coming Back



A NOVEL BY
K.L. DENMAN

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I'VE MADE IT to most of my appointments with Dr. Rosa Flores. But I missed the last one. I'm here now, sitting in her cozy office. It's in an old brick building with tall windows, and the decor has the feel of an old-fashioned porch. There's a pair of plump overstuffed chairs, the sort you sink into. The colors are green and cream, and the pictures on the walls are vibrant abstracts. I'm studying the flowered curtains at the window. Anything to avoid her watchful gaze.

“Has there been any change, Julie?” she asks.

She wants to know if I’ve been leaving my apartment. Seeing people. And the biggie: have I remembered the accident? I shake my head.

Dr. Rosa nods. “Okay. But you’re here again today. And that’s good. I know it takes a lot of effort.”

As pathetic as that is, it’s true. It takes every scrap of willpower I’ve got to come here. It’s not that I’m afraid to leave my place. Not exactly. I just don’t want to. It doesn’t feel like there’s any point. Nothing will change.

“Are you eating?” she asks.

I glance over and feel the warm concern she radiates. It fills the air around her. She’s older, a small woman with thick black hair pulled into a soft ponytail. I shrug and reply, “Enough.”

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“Good. Is there anything at all you’d like to share with me?”

I despise that question. No, there is nothing I’d like to share. Not because I’m especially private, but more because there really is nothing.

When I don’t reply, she asks the next question. “Are you sleeping?”

“Not really,” I mutter. As in I’m still afraid to sleep. Still having the nightmares. Every night I’m chased down dark roads by a faceless man in black. He wields relentless terror.

“Julie?” Dr. Rosa leans in toward me. “I’d like you to consider a new treatment. It’s not a medication. It’s something that will take a strong commitment from you.”

I shoot her a wary look. “I’m not trying the art or yoga classes again.”

“Fine. Because this is something quite different.” She pauses, watching me closely.

“I’d like to prescribe a companion animal for you. A cat perhaps. Or a dog.”

I stare at her. “You want me to get a pet?” I feel something as I say this. It’s a shimmery feeling I haven’t had for so long, it takes me by surprise. It might be actual interest. But the shimmer swiftly dies. “My building doesn’t allow pets.”

Dr. Rosa raises her brows. “That may be their general rule. But by law, they have to allow an emotional-support animal.”

“They do?” The shimmer of interest is back. “Are you sure?”

She grins. “They do if the animal is prescribed by a doctor. Like me.”

I feel something unfamiliar happening to my face.

“Julie,” she says, laughing. “You’re smiling!”

It’s true. But the smile fades as I resume studying the curtains. “I don’t know. I’ve

never had a pet of my own. What if I can't look after it?"

"But what if you can?" she asks. She quietly waits while I absorb that. Eventually she says, "Listen, Julie. I don't want you to make a decision yet. All I'm asking is that you think about it."

I nod. "Okay. I can do that." I don't remind her that even thinking is hard sometimes. But this? At least I *want* to think about this. That's saying something.

And I do think about it. On the drive home from Dr. Rosa's office it suddenly seems there are people walking dogs everywhere. There's a large black one with silky, wavy fur. It almost floats alongside its owner. There's a bulldog, mostly white, built low to the ground. Its thick legs are bowed, and its broad wrinkled face grins as it lumbers along the sidewalk. At a traffic light I look up and notice a calico cat watching from an apartment window.

The idea of a dog walking alongside me is tempting. And to have a cat waiting at home to cuddle and play with...that's tempting too. My family never had pets while I was growing up. My brother was allergic to them, so my only experience with animals was at friends' homes. My boyfriend...

I draw a blank there. I remember other boyfriends from the past, especially the one with the dog. Chad. We were together for two years before he dumped me. But that was before the last one, Roger. He's nothing more than a lurking shadow. Vague moments blanketed in fog. My mother says she never even saw a picture of him. I have one photo of us together, but his back is to the camera. I do remember that after Chad and I split, I met Roger online. We talked and Skyped every spare moment, and he seemed like a perfect match. Before long I moved across the country to be with him. My family and

friends were shocked, but I was excited about a fresh start. I was able to get a job transfer with the law firm I worked for. Even able to put a down payment on a small condo. It wasn't long before Roger moved in with me. It seems all was well for six months—and then the car accident happened.

When I got home from the hospital, there wasn't even a stray sock to show Roger had ever been there. No note. My phone was destroyed in the accident, and my computer was scrubbed clean of messages. It was as if he had tried to erase himself, but why? Was it guilt over him being the cause of the accident? I don't know.

I only know the bare details from the police report. Roger was driving and lost control. The car rolled at high speed and was a write-off. He walked away with minor injuries. One of the nurses at the hospital said he came to visit once. And that was it.

My family and friends wanted me to move back to them right away. They said I could get therapy there. That it wasn't like I had anyone here now, not even friends. I guess I wasn't with the new office long enough to form friendships. But something in me refuses.

Part of me believes that by staying here I'll recover my missing memory. Be the person I once was. I don't want my family and friends to see what I've become. The way it is now, I can ignore calls and messages. I tell them I like it here, and besides, I own my apartment. I received a large insurance settlement from the accident, enough to pay off the condo. Enough that I don't have to work for a long time.

But they don't like that either. They've all tried to convince me I'd be better off going back to work as a paralegal. I tell them that isn't possible with my impaired

concentration. My mother says, “You used to love it, Julie. It’s just not like you to do *nothing*. It’s been almost a year.”

Yes, almost a year in limbo. Of searching through a faulty mind to find answers that refuse to come. The one friend I haven’t been able to fully dodge is Kerry. She flew out to be with me after the accident—surprising since we’d parted on bad terms. Kerry hadn’t held back telling me she thought it was a huge mistake for me to move to the West Coast. I hadn’t held back replying that her opinion didn’t matter.

But she came. And she was there when the doctors said I didn’t suffer a head trauma that could account for the memory gap. Their diagnosis is post-traumatic stress disorder, and they say in time it’s likely my memory will return. How much time?

I give up thinking about the past and return to the pet idea. When I get home,

I make toast and open a can of bland pea soup. I dump it into a bowl, heat it in the microwave and then sit at my computer to eat. I begin researching dog breeds, then move on to cats. I spend an hour watching funny pet videos. Some of them even make me smile.

I spend all of the next week thinking about having a pet. Hours pass as I search online, reading and looking at images. By the time I return to Dr. Rosa's office, I'm ready to give her my answer.

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RAPID READS



RAPID
READS

Will Julie ever truly heal?

After surviving a horrific car accident and developing PTSD, Julie seeks healing with a therapy animal. She buys a horse, and she and her new mare go through some ups and downs as both get to know each other. Taking care of a horse is a lot to handle, and Julie is thrown off balance, both emotionally and in the saddle. Will Julie and the horse, Scarlett, be able to heal their broken spirits?

**“Horses, healing and
hope—*Coming Back* has it all.”**

—Ellen Schwartz,
author of *Heart of a Champion*

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