



**THESE  
TOXIC  
THINGS**

*A THRILLER*

**RACHEL  
HOWZELL HALL**

*NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

## PRAISE FOR *THESE TOXIC THINGS*

“Rachel Howzell Hall continues to shatter the boundaries of crime fiction through the sheer force of her indomitable talent. *These Toxic Things* is a master class in tension and suspense. You think you are ready for it. But. You. Are. Not.”

—S. A. Cosby, author of *Blacktop Wasteland*

“*These Toxic Things* is taut and terrifying, packed with page-turning suspense and breathtaking reveals. But what I loved most is the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of this gripping thriller. Plan on reading it twice: once because you won’t be able to stop, and the second time to savor the razor’s edge balance of plot and poetry that only Rachel Howzell Hall can pull off.”

—Jess Lourey, Amazon Charts bestselling author of *Unspeakable Things*

“The brilliant Rachel Howzell Hall becomes the queen of mind games with this twisty and thought-provoking cat-and-mouse thriller. Where memories are weaponized, keepsakes are deadly, and the past gets ugly when you disturb it. As original, compelling, and sinister as a story can be, with a message that will haunt you long after you race through the pages.”

—Hank Phillippi Ryan, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Her Perfect Life*

## PRAISE FOR *AND NOW SHE’S GONE*

“It’s a feat to keep high humor and crushing sorrow in plausible equilibrium in a mystery novel, and few writers are as adept at it as Rachel Howzell Hall.”

—*Washington Post*

“One of the best books of the year . . . whip-smart and emotionally deep, *And Now She’s Gone* is a deceptively straightforward mystery, blending a fledgling PI’s first ‘woman is missing’ case with underlying stories about racial identity, domestic abuse, and rank evil.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Smart, razor-sharp . . . Full of wry, dark humor, this nuanced tale of two extraordinary women is un-put-downable.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Smart, packed with dialogue that sings on the page, Hall’s novel turns the tables on our expectations at every turn, bringing us closer to truth than if it were forced on us in school.”

—Walter Mosley

“A fierce PI running from her own dark past chases a missing woman around buzzy LA. Breathlessly suspenseful, as glamorous as the city itself, *And Now She’s Gone* should be at the top of your must-read list.”

—Michele Campbell, bestselling author of *A Stranger on the Beach*

“One of crime fiction’s leading writers at her very best. The final twist will make you want to immediately turn back to page one and read it all over again. *And Now She’s Gone* is a perfect blend of PI novel and psychological suspense that will have readers wanting more.”

—Kellye Garrett, Anthony, Agatha, and Lefty Award–winning author of *Hollywood Homicide* and *Hollywood Ending*

“Sharp, witty, and perfectly paced, *And Now She’s Gone* is one hell of a read!”

—Wendy Walker, bestselling author of *The Night Before*

“Hall once again proves to be an accomplished maestro who has composed a symphony of increasing tension and near-unbearable suspense. Rachel brilliantly reveals the bone and soul of our shared humanity and the struggle to contain the nightmares of human faults and failings. I am a fan, pure and simple.”

—Stephen Mack Jones, award-winning author of the August Snow thrillers

“Heartfelt and gripping . . . I’m a perennial member of the Rachel Howzell Hall fan club, and her latest is a winning display of her wit and compassion and mastery of suspense.”

—Steph Cha, award-winning author of *Your House Will Pay*

“An entertainingly twisty plot, a rich and layered sense of place, and most of all a main character who pops off the page. Gray Sykes is hugely engaging and deeply complex, a descendant of Philip Marlowe and Easy Rawlins who is also definitely, absolutely her own woman.”

—Lou Berney, award-winning author of *November Road*

“A deeply human protagonist, an intricate and twisty plot, and sentences that make me swoon with jealousy . . . Rachel Howzell Hall will flip every expectation you have—this is a magic trick of a book.”

—Rob Hart, author of *The Warehouse*

“*And Now She’s Gone* has all the mystery of a classic whodunnit, with an undeniably fresh and clever voice. Hall exemplifies the best of the modern PI novel.”

—Alafair Burke, *New York Times* bestselling author

## PRAISE FOR RACHELL HOWZELL HALL

“A fresh voice in crime fiction.”

—Lee Child

“Devilishly clever . . . Hall’s writing sizzles and pops.”

—Meg Gardiner

“Hall slips from funny to darkly frightening with elegant ease.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

## PRAISE FOR *THEY ALL FALL DOWN*

“A riotous and wild ride.”

—Attica Locke

“Dramatic, thrilling, and even compulsive.”

—James Patterson

“An intense, feverish novel with riveting plot twists.”

—Sara Paretsky

“Hall is beyond able and ready to take her place among the ranks of contemporary crime fiction’s best and brightest.”

—*Strand Magazine*

**THESE  
TOXIC  
THINGS**

ALSO BY RACHEL HOWZELL  
HALL

*And Now She's Gone*

*They All Fall Down*

*City of Saviors*

*Trail of Echoes*

*Skies of Ash*

*Land of Shadows*

**THESE  
TOXIC  
THINGS**

**RACHEL  
HOWZELL HALL**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*To Maya the Beautiful*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

OUTLOOK GOOD

*Tuesday, November 19*  
*A Place for Children*  
*Simi Valley, CA*  
*10:43 p.m.*

At that time of night, there was peace. No burbles from the water cooler. No ringing telephones or whooshing copiers. Just her hands scratching against paper envelopes. Just her sweet soprano harmonizing with Ariana Grande's.

At twenty-three years old, and the most junior on the team, Allison Cagle stuffed envelopes as part of her job. Didn't matter that she didn't have a car. Didn't matter that Jessica, her work best friend and regular ride home, had just called three minutes ago—little Conner had a fever and Jessica needed to drive him to the emergency room. (*Watch your back! Don't wanna stress out over you two!*) Didn't matter that Allison had no idea how the hell she was getting home now. None of that mattered because the annual awards luncheon was tomorrow afternoon and three hundred envelopes—containing drink tickets, table numbers, and for fifty VIPs, parking validations—needed stuffing.

With smoky-blue eyes and a sleek SoulCycle body, Allison hadn't anticipated this much office work. Filing, collating, and stuffing killed her manicure. She preferred driving around Ventura and Los Angeles Counties, picking up in-kind donations from stores and bakeries. The Lakers, once. She'd expected more wooing donors and taking minutes at important meetings as she brushed blonde tendrils from her heart-shaped face. Flirty work, all in the name of charity and for kids caught between the foster care system and juvenile detention.

“Not stuffing fucking envelopes alone in a building at ten o'clock at night,” she muttered as she pulled a can of pepper spray from her purse and slipped on her raincoat.

Busy in the afternoons, Cochran Street was now clear of all traffic. Streetlamps threw weak light on wet roads, wet sidewalks, and the leaves of the magnolia trees. Rain—the annoying, gnat-like kind—swirled around her. Way out here in Simi Valley, forty-one miles north of Los Angeles, the

brush fires had nearly burned down the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. The flames had leveled too much brush, and now the streets chugged with mud.

Allison tapped the Uber app on her phone.

One car on the map. Ten minutes away.

She tapped “Confirm,” then turned back toward the sherbet-colored building.

A car horn tooted. The headlights of a gray Prius sped toward the curbside. The passenger-side window rolled down, and the driver shouted, “Are you Allie?”

This wasn’t the red Toyota Camry that was supposed to pick her up.

Gripping the can of pepper spray hidden in her pocket, Allison bent to peer into the car. “Do I know you?”

There was a US Army Special Forces patch on the front of the driver’s black mesh baseball cap. “Jess feels awful for flaking on you.”

Muscles tense, Allison blinked at the driver. In the rain, standing this far away, she couldn’t see the person clearly. Fair skin, the cap, and Elvis Costello eyeglass frames. Not the stereotypical Green Beret, with a square jaw and steely eyes.

Allison said, “Umm . . .”

The driver tapped their head, all *Silly me*. “Sorry. I’m Dale, Jessica’s cousin. She asked me to come pick you up since I live in this direction. It’s about to pour buckets, and she didn’t want you standing out here alone, waiting for a car.”

Allison remembered that Jessica’s cousin—*Dale?*—had been a decorated ranger. Smart. Christian. A hero. “She told me about you,” Allison said now. “Welcome home.”

Jellybean-size raindrops exploded from the sky. In the roar of rain, another car horn blared, this one from a white Ford F-150 driving from the opposite direction. Skinheads. Jessica had warned her. *Watch your back!*

The Ford slowed as the driver eyed her.

Allison had suffered through previous run-ins with stupid rednecks. At the mall, she’d made the mistake of wearing a Rihanna T-shirt, and those freaking white-trash losers had followed her to the Uber stop, lobbing “nigger lover” at her head. Sucked ’cause she didn’t even *listen* to Rihanna—the T-shirt had just looked so freaking cool at Urban Outfitters. Anyway,

seeing a truck filled with loser-dudes probably high on meth on a stormy night made everything inside her diarrhea-loose.

“You getting in or . . . ? I mean, you can wait for your Uber,” Dale said, shrugging.

The Ford U-turned and headed back their way.

Dale watched the truck’s reflection in the rearview mirror. “Friends of yours?”

Allison said, “Hell no.”

“Then you need to make a decision. I’m not interested in meeting those guys. Are you?”

And so Allison decided.

It was warm in the Prius, and it smelled like cinnamon buns and coffee.

“You don’t mind dropping me?” Allison asked. “An Uber’s four minutes away.”

“Of course not. Cancel it.” As the Prius pulled away from the curb, Dale’s eyes flitted from the slippery road to the reflection of the Ford in the rearview mirror. “These assholes.”

The Ford’s horn honked again, and the truck sped up until its chrome grille was just a kiss from the hybrid’s rear bumper.

Dale swerved to the right.

Allison’s heart jolted in her chest, and she closed her eyes and grabbed the door handle.

The Ford veered around the Prius.

*Splat!*

Yellow egg yolk mixed with the rain and slid down the Toyota’s windshield.

The truck sped east into the night.

Knuckles tight around the steering wheel, Dale exhaled. “I wanna say that I can’t believe those guys, but that wouldn’t be true.”

“Ha. Right?” Allison said.

Dale increased the windshield wipers’ speed to clean the egg off the glass.

Her lungs flexible again, Allison took a deep breath, then found her phone in her purse. She opened her Messages app and texted Jessica.

**TY for sending your cuz!**

## Right on time!

### Rain & skinheads.

“How long have you worked with Jess?” Dale asked.

“About six months.” Now, in the car’s quiet—and with her pulse no longer thundering in her ears—Allison could focus. She tried to remember any conversation she’d had with Jessica about her cousin coming home. *Sale at Topshop . . . the best acai bowl in the Valley . . . Ah! Dale was . . . was . . . shit.*

“You’re welcome,” Dale said.

Allison started to say, “For what?” but sensed that would be the wrong word choice. Instead, she said, “Yes—thanks so much for picking me up. You came in the nick of time.”

“You shouldn’t rely on other people to take you places. Because when you do, dangerous situations like this happen.”

“You’re totally right. I’m saving up for a car—” She cocked her head—Allison hadn’t told Dale her address, and yet they were now close to the Sage Creek Apartments off Yosemite Avenue. “You know where I live?”

An ice pick of fear drove through her head.

Dale tossed her a smile. “Jess told me—that’s how she knew that I could take you home. I live about a mile west of you, on Christine Avenue.”

“Ah. Makes sense.” Her insides burned. Good intentions or not, Allison didn’t appreciate Jessica sharing her personal information with a stranger, courageous war heroes included.

Dale must’ve sensed her anger. “Forgive Jess—she just wanted to help.”

Allison’s phone vibrated.

A simple message from Jessica.

??

“You and I met once,” Dale said.

*Really? When?* Allison typed back.

### Dale picking me up

Ellipses bubbled on the phone's screen.

"The carnival at Mayfair Park last month," Dale said. "You worked at one of the donation tables."

According to Jessica, their boss had stationed Allison at the annual-giving table because she was pretty. Men gave more if pretty women asked them. And now, Allison could almost remember seeing Dale wearing the Rangers baseball cap and the glasses . . .

"Do you remember me?" Dale asked. "You told me to smile, that I was at a carnival and needed to relax."

"To be honest? No. That was a busy—"

Allison's phone buzzed. As she read Jessica's response, the cloth seat beneath her warmed. Her bladder had released every liquid she'd drunk since dinnertime.

**Desi is still in Iraq.**

**Skyped w/her yesterday**

**WHO R U IN THE CAR WITH??**

With a shaky hand, Allison brushed her nose, touching the emerald stud in her left nostril. Her sister Lauren had boosted the gem from one of those cart vendors in the Galleria. Emeralds were her birthstone, and this stud was the most expensive, precious thing she owned.

And now, she had another decision to make.

Pull the can of pepper spray from her coat pocket or text Jessica for help.

*Can't do both.*

Fingers numb, she tapped **HEL**—

Dale grabbed the phone and tossed it out the driver's-side window.

"Relax, Allie. Better me than the skinheads, right?"

# 1.

I give him a woman's smile, the smile that has beheaded more important men than the one seated across from me at this high-gloss conference table. "Old lover" amalgamated with "bemused friend" brewed with "scorned woman." A cyanide smile.

I'm only twenty-four years old and I've already perfected this smile. As the only child of Coretta and Orson Lambert, I've watched my mother closely, learning her ways and parroting them earlier than most daughters mimic their mothers. She taught me this smile just like she taught me how to moisturize to keep my chestnut skin supple and how to clean up after myself. And she also taught me how to spot slights like this . . .

Interesting that Chris and I aren't meeting in his corner office. Interesting that he chose *this* conference room with its three glass walls. *I have to be transparent, baby. That's why . . .*

I move my shaky hands off that table, and ghosts of my damp fingers shimmer on the surface and then disappear. Like I was never here. My underarms prickle, and the hot air of anger and embarrassment warms my upper lip.

"Mickie . . . so does that mean . . . ?" Christopher Fenton—a golden boy with his symmetrical face and vintage Vans hoodie and black specs that don't enlarge one goddamned thing—smiles at me from across the table. It is a man's smile, the smile that unwinds across a man's face before he's maimed by a woman's razor-sharp nails and knife-edged words. He (unsuccessfully) sneaks a peek at the digital clock on the conference room wall, then says, "You get the gist? The scope of this one? Please let me know if I'm not being clear or . . ."

If I were a stronger, braver woman, his time of death would be 2:33.

In six weeks, I will include this resolution—to become stronger and braver—on my list.

Right now, though . . .

I underline the address I'd written in my binder.

### 111 Marlton Road

I tap the name beside the address—*Nadia*—and say, “I get the gist *and* the scope. And you're being absolutely clear. No problem.”

Christopher's gaze makes me melt, and so I look out the large-paned window at his back.

Crows flock against the blues and oranges of the dying Los Angeles daylight. They're searching for their last meal of worms, flies, take-out Mexican food, and anything else Southern California crows eat.

“You just seem . . .” Chris pulls both strings of his hoodie. “*Muted*. You're usually . . . *bubbly*. Do you need time to think about it? I want you to be comfortable . . .”

“*Oh?*” I offer him another cyanide smile. “I'm as comfortable as I can be.” I sit on my weak left hand and use my right hand to scribble *Start*. “When do I begin?”

He folds his hands before him on the table. “She—as in our client, Nadia Denham—said to come in tomorrow morning around eleven. But you can drive by her shop before then to get a sense of things. You know, the prep work before the prep work. She's old, which means she'll have a lot to say, and you listen well, and I'm *still* amazed at the bank you created for the 102-year-old Avery twins, who couldn't stop talking . . .”

I write *Nov. 21* next to *Start* as tears burn my eyes. I will them away by remembering that I could have any man I want, that I deserve a love greater than Chris Fenton's, that he's talking to me like I'm just another employee of the Memory Bank, and ohmigod, how jacked up is *that*. Thinking about these things pisses me off, and I close my binder with a pop.

Chris grabs his cell phone, the one I found after he'd lost it in a bin of apples at the grocery store. “Ms. Denham paid for the Mega-Memory Package.”

“Awesome.” I blow my bangs from my eyes and push away from the table.

Five thousand dollars for a specially curated, next-generation digital scrapbook that will recall those special places she's visited as well as souvenirs, pictures, and objets d'art that she's acquired. As a digital archaeologist, I transform a client's memories into Memories™. Pictures, letters—all scanned, photographed, captioned, and narrated—then uploaded into a voice-controlled box with an eight-inch screen and speakers.

A client request: *Memory Bank, tell me about Great-Great-Great-Grandmother's voyage to America.* I would've already composed that memory, and my colleague Willow—whose smoky British voice would make the technical-specs manual to build a toilet sound absolutely enthralling—would've voiced my narrative of Nana's immigration to the States.

But the feature that makes me twirl? Augmented reality. There's a small projector atop the bank device that casts a hologram, similar to the stars-and-moon projector in a kid's room but three-dimensional. *And!* With my hands over the bank's sensors, I can turn the projection this way and that. Pinch my fingers to zoom in and spread both hands to zoom out. *And!* You can email a picture of the artifact by simply asking. *Hey, Memory Bank, send the picture of the butterfly hand mirror to Aunt Shelby.*

We're now testing my idea: ROAD TRIP! GPS coordinates are attached to each item, and the ROAD TRIP! app directs you to the artifacts' origins. Visit Nana's homestead in Mobile, where she wore those curated baby shoes, then drive over to the jewelry store where Pop-Pop purchased her curated engagement ring. At each destination, ROAD TRIP! superimposes those shoes and that ring over the real-world location—the house, the jeweler's—similar to the cat ears over your picture in Snapchat or the first-down line on televised football games.

Christopher never thought my ideas, including ROAD TRIP!, were stupid or outlandish. "Let's go for it!"—that's what he's always said. A good listener and a great motivator: two qualities I loved about him.

"Mickie, are we okay?" Christopher asks now as he points from his chest to mine. "I know—me asking that question is like a lumberjack who just cut down a tree."

His words are fog.

I squint at him. "Chris, how am I supposed to feel right now?"

He blinks at me, then slaps his forehead as his skin creaks into a flush. "Crap. You didn't think I asked you to come in today to . . . ?"