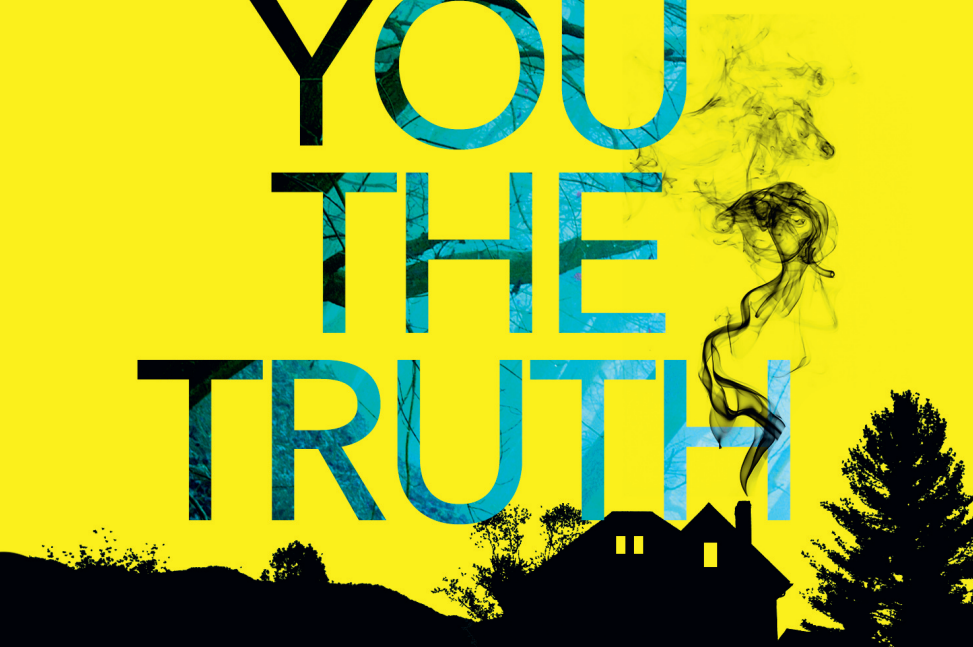
'Unforgettable'
SHARI LAPENA

'Dark and twisty'
LINWOOD BARCLAY

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH



EVERYBODY LIES

GILLY MACMILLAN

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH

Gilly Macmillan is the New York Times bestselling and Edgar-nominated author of *What She Knew, The Perfect Girl* and *Odd Child Out*. She grew up in Swindon and studied at Bristol University and The Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She has worked at *The Burlington Magazine* and the Hayward Gallery and has been a lecturer in photography. She now writes full-time and lives in Bristol with her family.

Praise for Gilly Macmillan

'Amazing, gripping, beautifully written.'
Liane Moriarty

'Pulses with tension until its shocking conclusion.'
Shari Lapena

'White-knuckled suspense.'
Tess Gerritsen

'Secrets, lies, jealousy and betrayal…Elegantly structured and infused with a creeping sense of dread.'
Sarah Vaughan

'Clever, tautly-plotted page-turner.'
Good Housekeeping

'A must read.'
Sunday Mirror

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Also available by Gilly Macmillan

What She Knew
The Perfect Girl
Odd Child Out
I Know You Know
The Nanny

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TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH

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To my family

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‘Fiction isn’t just what you find in books, it’s the lies we tell ourselves. They can be sturdy lies we use as scaffolding, lies with an abrasive edge to scour our consciences clean, lies that settle over things we’d rather not see like a pure drift of snow. There are many other permutations, but whatever form they take these are lies that we love and loathe.

‘The only way to avoid creating your own fiction is not to think at all.’

The Truth

– Lucy Harper

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PROLOGUE

There are the facts, and then there is the truth.

These are the facts.

It is the Summer Solstice, June 1991.

You're only nine years old. You're short for your age. The school nurse has recommended that you lose weight. You struggle to make friends and often feel lonely. You have been bullied. Teachers and your parents frequently encourage you to participate more in group activities, but you prefer the company of your imaginary friend.

We know you spend time that night in Stoke Woods because when you get home, leaves and pine needles are found on your clothing and in your hair, there is dirt beneath your fingernails and you reek of bonfire smoke.

Home is number seven Charlotte Close, a modest house identical to all the others on a short cul-de-sac built in the 1960s on a strip of land sold for development by a dairy farmer. It is situated adjacent to Stoke Woods, a couple of miles from the famous Suspension Bridge that links this semi-rural area directly to the city of Bristol.

We know you arrive home at 01:37, three hours and six minutes before dawn.

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As for the rest of what happened, you describe it many times in the days that follow, and you paint, of course, an exceptionally vivid picture, because even at that age you have a facility with words.

You tell it this way:

The stitch in your side feels like a blade, but you daren't stop or slow as you race through the woods towards home. Trees are gathered as far as you can see with the still menace of a waiting army. Moonlight winks through the canopy and its milky fragments dot and daub the understorey. The shifting light shrinks shadows then elongates them. Perspective tilts.

You drive forward into thicker undergrowth where normally you tread carefully but not tonight. Nettles rake your shins and heaps of leaf mould feel as treacherous as quicksand when your shoes sink beneath their crisped surface. The depths below are damp and grabby.

It's a little easier when you reach the path, though its surface is uneven and small pebbles scatter beneath your soles. Your nostrils still prickle from the smell of the bonfire.

It's easy to unlatch the gate to the woods' car park, as you've done it many times before, and from there it's only a short distance to home.

Each step you take slaps down hard on the pavement and by the time you reach Charlotte Close, everything hurts. Your chest is heaving. You're gasping for breath. You stop dead at the end of your driveway. All the lights are on in your house.

They're up.

Your parents are usually neat in silhouette. They are tidy, modest folk.

A bonus fact: including you and your little brother, the four of you represent, on paper, the component parts of a very ordinary family.

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But when the front door opens, your mother explodes through it, and the light from the hall renders her nightgown translucent so you have the mortifying impression that it's her naked body you're watching barrel up the path towards you, and there's nothing normal about that. There's nothing normal about anything on this night.

Your mum envelops you in her arms. It feels as if she's squeezing the last of your breath from you. Into the tangled mess of your hair she says, 'Thank God,' and you let yourself sink into her. It feels like falling.

Limp in her tight embrace, you think, please can this moment last forever, can time stop, but of course it can't, in fact the moment lasts barely a second or two, because as any good mother would, yours raises her head and looks over your shoulder, down the path behind you, into the darkness, where the streetlighting is inadequate, where the moonlight has disappeared behind a torn scrap of cloud, where the only other light is rimming the edges of the garage door of number four, and every other home is dark, and she says the words you've been dreading.

'But where's Teddy?'

You can't tell them about your den.

You just can't.

Eliza would be furious.

Your mum is clutching you by your upper arms so tightly it hurts. You have the feeling she might shake you. It takes every last ounce of your energy to meet her gaze, to widen your eyes, empty them somehow of anything bad she might read in them, and say, 'Isn't he here?'

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1.

I typed 'The End', clicked the 'Save' button and clicked it again just to make sure. I felt huge relief that I'd finished my novel, and on top of that a heady mixture of elation and exhaustion. But there were also terrible nerves, much worse than usual, because typing those words meant the consequences of a secret decision that I'd made months ago would have to be faced now.

Every year, I write a new book and the draft I'd just finished was my fifth novel, a valuable property, hotly anticipated in publishing houses in London, New York and other cities around the world. 'Valuable property' were my literary agent's words, not mine, but he wasn't wrong. Every day as I wrote, I imagined the staccato tapping of feet beneath desks as publishers awaited the book's delivery, and this time I felt extra nervous because I knew I was going to send them something they weren't expecting.

'Brave,' Eliza had said once she'd figured out what I'd done.

'I'm sorry,' I told her, and I meant it. Her voice had a new and nasty rasp to it, but everything has its price. Under different

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circumstances Eliza would be the first to point that out, because my girl is pragmatic.

I knew what I had to do next, but it was scary. I had a routine for summoning courage, because it was always hard to find, frequently lost in the scatter and doubt of writing a novel.

Counting to thirty took longer than it should have because I decelerated – I am a master of avoidance – but when I got to zero, I focused like a sniper taking aim. One tap of the finger and the novel was gone, out there, three hundred and thirty pages on their way to my agent, via email, and it was too late to change anything now.

I waited as long as a minute before refreshing my inbox to see if he had acknowledged receipt. He hadn't. I deleted emails from clothing retailers offering me new-season discounts because I thought they were traitorous messages, reminding me of my internet shopping habit at a moment when something more significant was happening, though I did glimpse a jumpsuit that I thought I might revisit later. It was a buttery colour, 'hot this spring' apparently and 'easy to accessorise'. Tempting and definitely worth another look, but not now.

I drummed my fingers on my desk. Refreshed again. Nothing. I clicked the back button and checked if they had the jumpsuit in my size. They did. No low-stock warning either. Nice. I added one to my shopping basket anyway. Just in case. Went back to email. Refreshed again. Still nothing. Checked my spam folder. Nothing there from Max, but good to see that hot women were available for sex in my city tonight. I deleted all spam, re-refreshed my inbox once more. No change.

I picked up the phone and called. He answered immediately. He has a lovely voice.

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'Lucy! Just a second,' he said, 'I'm on the other line. Let me get rid of somebody,' and he put me on hold. He sounded excited and it made me feel a little fluttery. Not because I'm attracted to him, please don't get the wrong idea, but because he's the person I plot and plan my career with, the gatekeeper to my publishers, negotiator-in-chief of book deals, firefighter-in-chief when things go pear-shaped, and recipient of a percentage of my earnings in return.

Max and I need each other, I'm his most successful client by far, so it was no surprise that he'd been trying to contain his impatience as my deadline for submitting the first draft of this book had approached, delivering pep talks and confidence boosts via phone and email. Whenever I met him, I noticed his nails were bitten to the quick.

He came back on the line after just a moment. 'I'm all yours.'

'It's done.'

'You. Bloody. Miracle.' I heard his keyboard clatter as he checked his email. 'Got it,' he said. There was a double click as he opened the document. I imagined his eyes on the first page. Seconds passed. They felt like millennia.

'Max?'

Was he reading it? Was he gripped by the first few lines of my story, or had he scanned a few pages ahead and was already feeling the cold wrap of horror, the clutch of disappointment? My nerves were shredded enough that I could catastrophise a three-second pause.

'I'll read it immediately,' he said. 'Right away. You must put down the phone and go directly to celebrate. Do not pass go. Treat yourself. Have a bath, open a bottle of something delectable,

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tell that husband of yours to spoil you. I'll call you as soon as I've finished it.'

At the very start of my career, before I had visited Max's office, I used to try to imagine what it was like. I thought he was the type to have a leather chair well stuffed enough to cradle his buttocks in comfort and a big desk, its surface large and polished so that it reflected light from the window it faced, which was probably ornate, containing leaded glass perhaps, or framed with elaborate stonework. That's the sort of person Max seemed to me to be, in spite of his bitten nails: a puppet-master. Only a puppet-master would have a desk like that. I shared that thought with him, once – we must have sunk a few cocktails, or I wouldn't have been brave enough to say it out loud – and he half-smiled, the expression aligning his asymmetric features.

'But you're the one who has the power of life and death,' he replied. 'Fictionally speaking,' he added after a beat.

True.

Beyond the chair, the desk and the architectural features, I also imagined that Max's office would be messy. Beautiful bones framing disorder was how I saw it and it was a very attractive image, to me.

I could find beauty in surprising things. You have to when violence reverberates through your work. I imagine every thriller writer will have their own way of handling this.

And, by the way, when I finally got to visit Max's office in person, I found it to be nothing at all like what I had expected.

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2.

After Max, Daniel, my husband, was always the second person to know when a book was finished, but I wanted a few moments to myself before I told him, moments when I didn't feel watched, because I felt like people watched me all the time.

My first novel had been published four years ago and exploded onto the crime fiction scene (my publisher's words, not mine) and high onto the bestseller list where it stayed for months. And I was introduced to the concept of a book a year – something Max and my editors insisted on as being of paramount importance. Since then people had taken extreme notice of me. They watched what I was writing next and learned to deduce how quickly I was writing it. They watched me at events. Online. They watched like hawks. They bombarded me with messages on social media. I even had one fan, so far unidentified, who had located the house in which Dan and I rented our flat – a modest building in a graffiti- and coffee-shop-speckled neighbourhood of Bristol – and left gifts on the doorstep.

The presents weren't really for me, though. The heroine of my novels was Detective Sergeant Eliza Grey. She was based on

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my childhood imaginary friend. (*Write what you know*, they say, and I did.) People were mad for Eliza and those gifts were for her. They included her favourite condiment (cloudberry jam – discovered when she was on secondment to a case in Oslo in Book Two) and her favourite beverage (a caffeinated energy drink). They made me uneasy, I won't lie, however well-intentioned they were. I asked Dan to get rid of them. They felt like an intrusion into my private life.

It had profoundly shocked me, how suddenly and completely I had become public property after the publication of my first Eliza book. I hadn't anticipated it, and had I known it would happen, I might never have sent my novel out to literary agents in the first place. The minute I'd signed over the rights to that book, nobody cared that my natural inclination was to curl around my privacy as tightly as a woodlouse.

My moment of alone-ness in the office was disappointing. Instead of basking in a sense of peaceful privacy (as opposed to the fraught loneliness that usually characterised my writing days), I could only see the mess.

I'd shut myself in that room for weeks to get the book finished, working on a crazy schedule of late nights and dawn starts, sometimes a frenzy of typing in the early hours, interspersed with snatches of fractured sleep. My circadian rhythm had been more tarantella than waltz and it showed. Even my printer looked tired, its trays askew, fallen paper on the floor beneath it: a courtesan whose client has just left. She dreams of marrying him. (But I mustn't personify my printer. What will you think of me?) The floor and coffee table were hardly visible beneath a townscape created from piles of printed drafts and research materials.

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‘Should you really dump your stuff on an authentic Persian rug?’ Dan had asked from the doorway a few weeks ago, when the surfaces could no longer contain all the clutter and it had begun to creep over the floor. I hadn’t thought of it that way. I was more used to soft furnishings from IKEA, we both were, it’s all we had ever known, but we were at a point where Dan was getting accustomed to the finer things in life and growing into the new wealth my books had brought us more quickly than I was. He had the time to luxuriate in it and to figure out how to spend it; I didn’t. My writing schedule saw to that. I couldn’t afford to look up from my work and enjoy the change in our lives. I was barely aware it was happening.

It wasn’t just the fancy rug that took some getting used to. The cottage we were renting was also a reflection of what we found ourselves newly able to afford. The weekly rate had seemed eye-watering to me when Dan first proposed the idea, an insult to my natural inclination to be economical and unflashy, but Dan had insisted that we needed to be here.

‘You can’t do the final push on this book in the flat,’ he’d said with an irritating air of authority, honed for years on the subjects of writing and the creative process, but recently applied more frequently to our domestic life. ‘It’s too claustrophobic. We’ll be on top of each other.’

He was right, and I knew it, but I loved writing in our cosy one-bed flat with its views of the little row of shops opposite, and the smells from the bakery wafting across the street every morning. And I felt superstitious. I’d written all my books so far in that flat. What if a change of routine affected my writing? What if it signalled that I had got above myself? Everyone knows that tall poppies are the first to be decapitated.

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But even as those anxieties raised a swarm of butterflies in my stomach, I knew I had to take Dan's wishes carefully into consideration because he worked full-time for me, now, and it made the issue of who had the power in our household a delicate one. I tried to think of how to frame my objections to renting the cottage in a way that wouldn't upset him, but I got tongue-tied. Words flow for me when I'm writing, but they can stick in my throat like a hairball when I have to speak up for myself.

Dan softened his tone to deliver the winning line: 'We can easily afford it, I've looked at the numbers, and imagine being in the countryside … by the ocean too. It'll be so good for us.'

I was susceptible to emotional blackmail, and to the potential for romance. Writing is a lonely job, as I've said. I also had to trust him on the money, because he managed my finances for me. Trying to grapple with taxes and columns of numbers plunged me into panic.

I agreed to rent the place and watched him click 'Book Now' but as he did, I had the strange feeling that life had somehow just shifted a little bit beyond my control.

There's something else I should mention, in the spirit of full disclosure.

On paper, ours was a nice, mutually beneficial, privileged arrangement where I would write a thriller each year and continue to rake in the money, and Dan would provide all the support I needed, but there was a large and rather revolting fly stuck in the ointment, its legs twitching occasionally.

The fly was this: being my assistant wasn't the life Dan had dreamed of. He'd wanted to be a bestselling author, too.

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I

On the night Teddy disappears, you wait until midnight before trying to leave the house. You're eager to get going because dawn will break in just a few hours and it's only until then that the spirits will be out, moving amongst real people, making mischief, playing tricks.

You know what happens on the Summer Solstice because you researched it in the library. You are a very able nine-year-old. 'Exceptionally bright,' your teacher wrote in your report. 'Reading and writing to a level well beyond her age.'

Your bedroom door creaks and the noise cuts right through you. You count to ten and nothing happens, so you think you're safe, and you step out onto the landing, but Teddy's door opens when you're right outside it.

'What are you doing?' he says.

You shush him, hustle him into his bedroom, helping him back into bed, nestling his blankey by his head the way he likes it.

'Go back to sleep,' you whisper. You stroke his hair. He puts his thumb into his mouth and sucks. His eyelids droop. You force yourself to stay there until you're sure he's gone back to sleep.

You've just crept over to his bedroom door when he says, 'Lucy, I want you.'

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Your fingers clench. You very badly want to go out into the woods. You've been planning this for weeks. You turn around. He looks sweet, lying there.

'Do you think you can be really quiet?' you say.

'Teddy can be quiet.' He refers to himself in the third person more often than not. Later, someone will say it's as if he always knew he wouldn't be with us for long.

'Don't take him with you,' Eliza says in your head. Your imaginary friend always has an opinion.

'He'll cry if I don't,' you reply silently, 'and wake up Mum and Dad.'

'Then you can't go.'

That's not an option you want to consider. You hold out your hand and Teddy's eyes brighten.

'Do you want to come on an adventure?' you ask him.

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3.

Sitting in my office alone didn't just feel disappointing, I also felt guilty, because the end of a book was happy news and Dan deserved to share it right away. My schedule was punishing for both of us, and he needed these moments of celebration just as much as I did.

I levered myself up from my seat, left my lair with a sense of traversing a portal, and found him in the kitchen, stirring a casserole dish. I watched him for a moment before he sensed me. He seemed preoccupied by something, the wooden spoon doing little more than troubling the surface of the food.

'Hi,' I said, from the doorway. He turned and half-smiled, evidently trying to assess my state of mind, his first instinct at this stage of a book to be wary of me. Here I was, his very own Gollum, whose precious obsession was a novel. Had she finished? Finally? Or had her glazed and bloodshot stare been fixed on a blinking cursor at the top of a blank page, while at the far end of her optic nerve her mind shredded itself with doubt?

I saw those questions in his eyes and had the stupid idea that it might be fun to break the tension by conveying that I had

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good news to share by doing a little victory dance. I tapped one fist on top of the other, twice, then swapped over. Got my hips swaying. Kept it jaunty. It took a lot of concentration in the exhausted state I was in, and I might have been frowning, but I wanted to try it because it was the sort of thing that he and I used to do all the time, a frivolous language we shared with one another, that made us giggle.

But Dan's eyes widened. It was as if he didn't know how to speak frivolous anymore – or didn't want to. I stopped, awash with self-consciousness. He flipped the dishcloth he was holding over his shoulder and cleared his throat. 'How's it going?' he asked. He was wearing a novelty apron I'd bought him, with the slogan, 'I can cook as good as I look'.

He did look good, sleek and composed, buffed and polished. The Dan I'd met seven years ago, that shabby, podgy guy running on creative passion and budget groceries, had been transformed by the injection of money. He wasn't just taking care of his appearance, but had worked on improving himself in other ways, too. He knew about wine, now. He'd invested in a fancy car. He'd even encouraged me to get a stylist, but I hadn't had the time to do that, or to keep up with him in other ways. The only efforts I'd made to improve were my occasional splashy online clothing purchases, and even then, I was never quite sure whether I'd bought the right thing.

I also wasn't exactly certain when Dan's pattern of transformation had begun. While I wrote my second book? The third? After *that* big royalty cheque? The book-a-year schedule meant that time was sometimes confusing to me, its linearity a deck of cards that could be reshuffled. Creating fiction left no

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mental space for orderly recollections of reality. I thought of my memories as tall grasses that could be blown this way or that.

'Your memories were like that before you started writing,' Eliza muttered. I couldn't deny it. Eliza and I were always honest with one another.

'Earth to Lucy,' Dan said. 'Hello?' He sounded tetchy. He hated it when I zoned out.

'I finished the book. I sent it to Max.'

'Truly?'

I nodded and smiled at him, and realised it was probably the first time I'd smiled in a while. The relevant muscles in my cheeks had fallen slack from disuse but making them work was a glorious feeling. Dan hugged me and I felt the adrenaline leave my body in a rush, as if he was squeezing it from me. He smelled of wood smoke and the *ragù* he was making. The aroma of normality. I was landing back on earth. Coming back to life. Blinking in the daylight.

'Congratulations,' he said into the top of my head. The sweet intimacy of it was lovely. 'Bloody well done. What can I do? Can I make you a cup of tea?'

I sat down at the table with all the grace of a sack of flour dropped from a height and felt as if I'd been released from a hospital room after months of convalescence. Everything was possible now. Normality was possible. I could make up to Dan for everything he'd been doing for me. We could have some fun. Just so long as they liked the book.

'If you make me a cup of tea, I'll have to kill you,' I said, 'or at the very least, divorce you. Let's open a bottle of something very cold and very good.'

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Dan went to find champagne. We'd brought some with us. The good stuff. Nothing fake. Another upgrade. I didn't dare admit to him that I disliked the way champagne sent a metallic sparkle up my nose when I drank it, and how a second glass of it sometimes made me cry, and that part of me missed the cheap alcohol we used to enjoy.

My spirits dipped a little after Dan left the room, because it was impossible to forget the secret I'd been keeping about the new book, and I felt the corners of my mouth droop. When I heard him coming back, I made the effort to plaster that smile back on, though. Now wasn't the time to tell him. First we needed our celebration.

I watched as he filled our glasses. The champagne was the palest, most fragile gold. One of the windows was cracked open, and I could hear the ocean and see the sun creeping behind the edge of the barn, a watery orb, spilling yellow light. Dan placed a bowl of roasted nuts on the table, homemade, my favourite. He kissed me with dry lips and picked up his drink.

'Congratulations,' he said. I registered the lovely sparkle in his eye that I hadn't seen for a while, and that made me melt a little, and the gentle tilt of his glass towards mine, but I also had to swallow my nerves because he was giving me a cue and I knew what I should say. I should toast Detective Sergeant Eliza Grey.

I wrote about the Eliza Grey toast for a Sunday newspaper once, describing how Dan and I made it whenever the first draft of a new Eliza book was complete. Fans read the interview and picked up on our little ritual, sending me photographs of themselves raising a glass once they'd finished reading the

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latest Eliza Grey novel. It became a thing on bookish social media. It had its own hashtag: #CheersEliza.

I couldn't bring myself to say the words Dan was expecting, though, because it would have been tantamount to a lie after I'd effectively removed Eliza from this book completely by incapacitating her. I'll spare you the details. No spoilers. But that was my secret, the reason anxiety was pinching even as I was supposed to be celebrating.

'Why did you do this?' Eliza had whispered when it happened. I found it hard to get used to the way her voice had been altered by her injuries. It made me feel horribly guilty. Nobody wants to hurt their childhood friend. The problem was, she'd become something more disruptive.

When I had decided to base the character of Detective Sergeant Eliza Grey on her, five years ago, Eliza had been a voice in my head, my friend, confidante and protector. It had been amazing to bring her to life on the page. But she had evolved, somehow becoming more than words. It was as if she had been formed from clay and life breathed into her. When I was writing my third novel, she stepped right out of the pages and into my life.

'I see you everywhere,' I told her. 'I can't handle it.'

At first it had been manageable, but it had begun to happen more and more frequently, until Dan had noticed me being distracted by her. He'd asked awkward questions, accused me of behaving strangely. I didn't know how to explain.

'I'll disappear whenever you want me to,' Eliza had pleaded, 'you just have to say,' but we both knew that wasn't true. She was too much of a maverick and it had been far too long since I'd had her under control. 'I don't want to be out of the books. Please don't do it.'

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She'd sounded desperate but I'd ignored her plea. It wasn't easy because it hurt me to hurt her, but it was the way it had to be. And, honestly, I didn't know what else to do. But it had worked. Eliza hadn't appeared to me in person since I'd written the scene that took her out of the book. I still heard her voice, but that was fine, I was used to it. I couldn't remember a time when that hadn't been the case.

Dan, left hanging, his glass in mid-air, confusion creasing his forehead, decided to speak for me, though it wasn't his place to, not really, but he said it anyway: 'Cheers, Eliza!'

He chinked his glass against mine and I smiled and swallowed my discomfort along with the champagne. How was I going to explain to him what I'd done when I could never tell him the truth about her, because he'd never understand?

After all, what kind of person creates a character who walks right out of their books and into their life?

He would think I'd lost my mind.

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4.

Dan didn't notice my discomfort. In his haste to offer me a refill, he knocked over the bowl of nuts, but I'd almost emptied it. He was buzzing.

A completed first draft of the book didn't just mean a measure of freedom for us both, it also meant delivery payments. Not right away – the book would have to be dragged through edits and fully finished for that – but soon. Dan kept spreadsheets tracking my income. The blinking cursor he stared at on a regular basis was the one sitting in the Excel box where he would enter my delivery payment when it landed. He loved to do that.

We took our drinks outside and walked to the end of the garden to watch the sun sink towards the ocean. Waves pounded the rocks mercilessly. The surface of the ocean was a thousand shades of grey and silver, the spray foamy and angry against rocks slicked oily black, their silhouettes slicing the surface of the water after every push and pull of the tide.

I shivered from the cold and leaned into the warmth of Dan's body. It was a balm for my sore muscles and my tired mind, for

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my nerves. The moment felt incredibly intimate to me after the months I'd spent in the company of fictional people.

Neither of us spoke. Even if we had, the salty wind would have whipped our words away. We sipped our drinks, and I cried after a while. The second glass of fizz guaranteed it, and the creeping feeling of dread that wouldn't go away.

I couldn't stop thinking about how Max felt, or would feel, when he read the scene in my new book that put Eliza out of action. How shocked would he be? How fast would he scroll frantically on through the pages, imagining money slipping through his fingers as easily as sand, hoping against hope that I had pulled off some kind of novelistic sleight of hand and Eliza would reappear within pages to continue her domination of the market?

I knew he'd be devastated initially, there was no point kidding myself. The question was whether that would abate when he read the rest of the book. My stomach curled. *Hold your nerve*, I told myself, *this book is much better than all your others. It's a fresh start for you*. But my courage was liquidising.

Dan didn't notice I was upset. He had his eyes fixed on the horizon. He would have put my tears down to exhaustion, anyway; it wouldn't be the first time I'd wept at the end of a book. Each one found its own special way to drain me.

The wind dried my teardrops as quickly as they arrived and, after a while, I laughed to myself and thought, what was the point of them, really? What was done was done. I should be confident.

I took a bath when we got back inside. Dan went back to the kitchen to finish off dinner. He was still keyed up, energy humming off him. I thought he was happy that the book was

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finished and that we could finally spend some time together. I got into the claw-footed tub and basked in steaming water so bubbly that it beautifully obscured my white jelly flesh, and I emptied my brain by speculating about how much the fancy taps had cost.

I went downstairs afterwards in my dressing gown, expecting to eat on the sofa, in front of a movie, our usual ritual at the end of a book, but Dan had laid the kitchen table and it was fancy. There were fresh flowers and another bottle of champagne propped at a jaunty angle in an ice bucket. The apron was off. He was grinning.

'What's this?' I said.

'Are you happy to go back to Bristol tomorrow?'

'Sure. If you want to.' I would have preferred to stay here for a few more days, to give myself a chance to decompress, but I was balancing those marital scales, prepared to be acquiescent.

'I've got something to show you when we get there.'

'What is it?'

'A surprise.'

He popped the cork and I jumped when it flew across the room. The champagne frothed down the neck of the bottle and Dan licked it away.

'What's the surprise?' I asked.

'My lips are sealed,' he said. 'I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you.'

'Tell me!'

'No. You have to wait.'

'Is it a good surprise?'

'Oh, yes.'

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This was exciting. Dan had never done anything like it before. I was grateful I hadn't soured things with the news about Eliza.

I leaned in to kiss him, properly kiss him, but he pulled back and made himself busy pouring. I tried again but he wasn't having it. It was hard not to feel upset. We hadn't been intimate for a long time.

'Don't you want to eat first?' he asked. 'Dinner's ready.' I supposed I was hungry. Dan pushed a block of Parmesan and a grater toward me. 'Your job,' he said. 'Don't grate your knuckles again.'

If he hadn't said that, I swear I would have done it without mishap, but his words made me feel self-conscious about what I was doing, and my fingers were trained to type, not grate, and I was tired, and the accident was inevitable. My knuckles didn't bleed for too long.

It was a good meal, though. We ate spaghetti garnished with pointy hillocks of dandruffy Parmesan like messy fools, our lips reddening from the sauce. Dan assiduously topped up the champagne. After we had eaten, he insisted on clearing up and, while he did, I stretched out on the sofa and was carried off by sleep in a matter of seconds, as if it were a beautiful drug, as if I had nothing to worry about.

I wonder, now, how I had no premonition of what was to come. How I, who could imagine evil in a heartbeat, transcribe it onto the page in ways that chilled the blood of my readers, was able to slip into an unsuspecting sleep so easily, cheek muscles aching from smiling. It's a little bit embarrassing. After all, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that not all surprises are good ones. Especially when you're keeping a secret yourself.

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II

Teddy insists on bringing his blankey with him, but he sits silently while you put on his shoes and he's good at being quiet as you walk down Charlotte Close together. Your excitement infects him. You can feel it in his tight grip, the slick of sweat between your palms, and when he looks up at you, he breaks into a wide smile. Teddy loves to do things with you. His trust is absolute.

The night is humid, the sky crisp, clear and bright with stars. There is a waning gibbous moon and you have a small torch. Excitement bloats inside you.

Once you're on the main road, you let him talk, but you walk in the shadows in case any passing cars see you. There is only one. It slows beside you and you duck into a driveway and wait there, your chest heaving, your face close to Teddy's and your finger on your lips. He mirrors you. 'Shhh,' he says. The car moves on.

You turn into the lane that leads to the woods' car park and as soon as you do, you feel it: the spirits are in the trees.

'Can you feel them?' you ask Teddy. A breeze rustles something, somewhere close. 'Teddy can feel them,' he says.

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'Come on,' you say. You lift him over the stile. It's not easy because he's heavy, but you manage, and you lead him into the woods.

'What does Teddy feel?' he asks when you've walked a little way into the darkness.

'Not scared,' you say. Your heart feels as if it has been pumped fuller than usual. Your mind is dancing.

'Not scared,' he repeats.

'That's the spirit, Teddy,' you say.

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5.

Dan and I made the journey back to our flat in Bristol the next morning. I had still heard nothing from Max by the time we left. I emailed to let him know my movements, but he didn't reply. His silence gnawed at me and so did a spiteful little hangover.

The journey home felt like the start of a new chapter. Glittering sea views and trees bent double by gales disappeared in the rear-view mirror as we gradually re-entered civilisation and soon the motorway beckoned. Three lanes of traffic, roaring between cities. We went north. Dan put his foot down and turned the music up and I gazed out of the window and looked forward to being home. I'd thought I might tell him about Eliza on the drive, but I wanted to know what his surprise was, first.

My first clue was when Dan didn't take our usual turn off the motorway. I glanced at him and he glanced back at me and raised his eyebrows. He was smiling but I found I couldn't smile back because this road was familiar to me. We were driving towards my childhood, the street where I grew up. Charlotte Close.

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I fixed my eyes on the road's centre markings and didn't look up. I knew where every landmark on this road was and knew there was nothing I wanted to see here. As we approached the junction with Charlotte Close, my chest tightened. Here was where reporters had camped out when I was a child, incessantly calling out my name, desperate to talk to me even after my dad pleaded with them to leave us alone.

When we were almost beside it, Dan said, 'It's okay. You're fine. Don't panic.'

'Yes,' I said. It was the only word I could manage.

'Breathe,' Eliza whispered. I listened to her and made myself match the soft rhythm of her inhalations and exhalations, and we breathed in synchrony until Dan had driven past the end of Charlotte Close and on past Stoke Woods, which began where the small gardens on one side of Charlotte Close ended.

Those woods were what I saw from my bedroom window as a child. The old oaks bled oxygen into the air I breathed and enchanted me.

I felt my tension release when we were past the boundary on the other side of the woods, but my relief was premature, because Dan switched on the indicator light and slowed the car before turning into a lane that ran alongside the far edge of the woods. A sign at the junction read, 'Private lane'.

I had roamed the woods as a child, but never explored this far on my own. I vaguely remembered my parents driving us down here, once, to rubberneck the big houses, but otherwise this place had been meaningless to us. Another country. Until the investigation into Teddy's disappearance, when police had questioned the residents, but nothing had come of that, and we had forgotten it again.

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