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J.T. ELLISON

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LIE TO ME

Available September 5, 2017

from MIRA Books.

IN WHICH INTRODUCTIONS ARE MADE

You aren't going to like me very much. Oh, maybe in your weaker moments, you'll feel sorry for me, and use those feelings of warmth and compassion and insightful understanding to excuse my actions. You'll say to yourself, "Poor little girl. She couldn't help herself." Or, "Can you blame her? After all she's been through?" Perhaps you'll even think, "She was born to this. It is not her fault."

Of course it's my fault. I chose this path. Yes, I feel as if I have no choice, that I'm driven to do it, that there are voices in my head that push me to the dark side.

But I also know right from wrong. I know good from evil. I may be compelled to ruin the lives in front of me, but I could walk away if I wanted.

Couldn't I?

Never mind that. Back to you.

Truly, deep down, you are going to despise me. I am the rot that lives in the floorboards of your house. I am the spider that

scuttles away when you shine a light in my corner, ever watching, ever waiting. I am the shard of glass that slits the skin of your bare foot. I am all the bad things that happen to you.

I steal things.

I kill things.

I leave a trail of destruction in my wake that is a sight to behold, wave after wave of hate that will overwhelm you until you sink to the bottom of my miserable little ocean, and once you've drowned I will feed on your flesh and turn your bones to dust.

You're mine now. You are powerless against me. So don't bother fighting it.

I hope you enjoy the show.

WE FIND A BODY

The body was in the woods off a meandering state road that led into a busy, charming, historical downtown. It was completely obscured from view, deeply hidden, under several pine boughs and a thick layer of nature's detritus. Synthetic clothing was melted to the flesh, making it difficult to tell race or gender at a glance. Closer inspection would show hair that was long and a curious shade: not blond, not red, possibly chemically treated. The left hand held evidence of rings, a wedding set, and the body would eventually be determined as female.

The shroud of melt and bough had not stopped the forever daisy-chain progression of decay. Instar maggots and adult flies delighted in their found treat. A genus party started soon after. Diptera and coleoptera were evident three days in, paving the way for the coming colonization of Calliphoridae. Though the body was burned beyond ready recognition, the insects didn't seem to mind; it was simply a barbecue feast to them.

Outside of this natural progression, the body lay undisturbed for two days. Birds of prey flew in long, lazy circles overhead. Cars drove past less than fifty yards away, drivers unknowing, uncaring, that one of their own lay rotting nearby.

Three Days Gone, a severe thunderstorm knocked free several of the funereal branches, allowing the body to be exposed, pelted

by hail breaking through the leafy canopy. The heavy rains saturated the ground and the body sank deeper into the muck, where it canted on its side.

Four Days Gone, the body was ravaged by a starving coyote, forty-two razor teeth shredding everything available.

Five Days Gone, the body disarticulated, the fire and the heat and the wet and the insects and the coyote and the natural progression of things breaking it down quickly and without thought to the effects this would have on the loved ones. The idea of a nonintact body was sometimes more than people could take.

Six Days Gone, they found her.

ETHAN

“Chaos is a name for any order that produces confusion in our minds.”

—George Santayana

SOMETHING'S MISSING

Franklin, Tennessee

Now

Ethan found the note ten minutes after he rolled out of bed that Tuesday, the Tuesday that would change everything. He came downstairs, yawning, scratching his chest, to...nothing. Empty space, devoid of wife.

Sutton always began her morning at the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal, a piece of fruit, and a cup of tea. She read the paper, scoffing at the innumerable typos—the paper was going under; paying for decent copyediting was the least of their worries. A bowl full of cereal, a glass of milk, and a spoon would be laid out for him, the sports page folded neatly by his seat. Always. Always.

But this morning, there was no evidence Sutton had been in the kitchen. No newspaper, no bowl. No wife.

He called for her. There was no response. He searched through the house. Her bag was in her office, her cell phone, her laptop. Her license was stashed in her small wallet, all her credit cards present and accounted for, a twenty folded in half shoved behind them.

She must have gone for a run.

He felt a spark of pleasure at the thought. Sutton, once, had been a health nut. She'd run or walked or done yoga every day, something physical, something to keep her body moving and in shape. And what a shape—when he'd met her, the woman was a knockout, willowy and lithe, strong legs and delicate ankles, tendons tight and gleaming like a Thoroughbred. A body she sculpted to match his own, to fit with him.

Ethan Montclair couldn't have a dog for a wife, no. He needed someone he could trot out at cocktail parties who looked smashing in a little black dress. And not only looked good, but sounded good. He needed a partner on all levels—physical and intellectual. Maybe it was shallow of him, but he was a good-looking man, drew a lot of attention, and not only did he want his wife to be stunning, he wanted her to be smart, too. And Sutton fit the bill.

He knew they made a powerful, attractive couple. Looks and brains and success, so much success. That was their thing.

After Dashiell, she'd bounced back into shape like the champion racehorse she was; though later, when their world collapsed, she'd become tired and bloated and swollen with medications and depression, and she no longer took any interest in being beautiful and fit.

That she'd decided to start running again gave him hope. So much hope.

Spirits lifted, he went back to the sunny, happy kitchen and got his own bowl, his own cereal. Made a pot of tea, whistling. Went for the stevia—no sugar for the health-conscious Montclairs, no, never.

That was when he saw it. Small. White. Lined. Torn from a spiral-bound notebook, a Clairefontaine, Sutton's favorite for the smooth, lovely paper.

This...thing...was incongruous with the rest of their spotless kitchen. Sutton was above all things a pathological neatnik. She'd never just leave something lying about.

All the happiness fled. He knew. He'd been all wrong. She hadn't gone running.

He picked up the note.

Dear Ethan,

I'm sorry to do this to you, but I need some time away.

I've been unhappy, you know that. This shouldn't come as a big surprise. Forgive me for being a coward. Forgive me, for so many things.

Don't look for me.

S

She was gone.

He felt something squeezing in his chest, a pain of sorts, and realized that his heart had just broken. He'd always thought that a stupid, silly term, but now he knew. It could happen, it was happening. He was being torn in two, torn to shreds. No wonder there were rites warning against this—*what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder*.

God was ripping him apart in punishment, and he deserved it. He deserved it all.

He didn't cry. There were no tears left for either of them to shed.

He put the note down carefully, as if it were a bomb that might go off with the wrong touch. Went to their bedroom. Nothing seemed out of place. Her brush, her makeup case, her toothbrush, all lined up carefully on the marble. Her suitcase was in the closet.

He went back downstairs to her office, at the back of the house. Double-checked.

Her laptop was on her desk.

Her cell phone was in the charger.

Her purse was on the floor next to her chair.

Her wallet inside, the smiling DMV photo that made her look like a model.

Like a zombie, he moved back to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and got out the milk. Poured cereal in the bowl. Dropped the stevia into his tea. Sat at the empty table, stared at the spot where his wife's head should have been.

What was he supposed to do now? Where could she be? He ran through the possibilities, the places she loved, rejecting one after another. Surely he was wrong in his thinking. Surely she'd simply run away, to one of her friends. That's where she'd gone. Should he give her some time and space, like she asked?

She left without her things, Ethan. Sutton's lifelines are her laptop and phone. They are her office, her world.

A dawning realization. Sutton hadn't shaken the depression, not completely. She was still prone to fits of melancholy. She might have done something stupid, crazy. She'd tried once before, after... Oh, God. Her words. Perhaps she was telling him exactly what she'd done.

I'm a coward. Forgive me. Don't look for me.

He threw the bowl of cereal across the room.

“Bloody fucking hell. You selfish, heartless bitch.”

DID SHE, OR DIDN'T SHE?

Don't look for me.

Those were the last words she'd used to him.

And so he didn't. Not right away, at least. He sat and wrapped his mind around the situation. Then he searched through everything of hers he could find, looking for something, anything, that might give answers.

Nothing. It was like she'd gone to take a shower and disappeared through the water into another land.

He went into deep, irreversible denial. *She is fine*, he told himself. *She's taking a break*. The self-talk worked. His morbid thoughts fled. He knew, deep in his heart, Sutton would never be that selfish.

He gave her three hours to come back, three long, quiet as the bone hours, and then, when the idea that she might actually be in some sort of trouble started to eat at him, began calling round. Of course he did. He wasn't a total asshole, despite what most people thought. It was the success—people automatically assumed because he was a man and he didn't like to give interviews and held people at arm's length at signings and he

kept himself off social media and focused on his work, he was a dick. Maybe he was.

He called her friends—there weren't many, but the ones she had were close, bosom buddies, BFFs.

Rachel hadn't seen her and was brusque, late for work. Out of character for her; a yoga teacher, she was generally the most calm and friendly of Sutton's friends.

Ellen, the head of library sciences at Vanderbilt University, didn't answer her mobile; he left an innocuous "Hey, call me," message.

Filly—Phyllis, really, but she hated to be called by her given name—answered her landline on the first ring, no doubt assuming it was Sutton calling. Even at Ethan's voice, her greeting was cheery and excited. When Ethan asked if she'd seen Sutton, she seemed genuinely concerned, but claimed they hadn't talked for a few days because Sutton had been so busy. He couldn't help it, Filly's concern was so genuine and helpful he immediately suspected she knew something, but when pressed, she reassured him Sutton was probably just out for a run and told him to call her when Sutton showed up, then got off the phone with a lame excuse about her baby crying. *Way to twist the knife, Filly.*

Ivy was out of town on business, or he'd have called her first. Ivy was friends with them both. She was Sutton's closest friend and confidante, a true part of their lives. Had been for three years now. He glanced at his watch, hesitated for a minute, then sent a text. A self-employed stockbroker, she was good about keeping her phone on her. She'd get back when she was able, she always did.

He sat at the table, head in his hands. Jumped a mile when the phone rang. He didn't bother looking at the caller ID, answered with a breathless, "Sutton?"

"It's Siobhan. What's wrong?"

Oh, bloody retching hell. Sutton's mother was the last person he wanted to involve in this. To put it mildly, Siobhan and Sut-

ton weren't close, and Sutton would be furious with him if she knew he'd spoken to her at all.

Deflect, and get her off the phone.

"Good morning, Siobhan. How are you?"

"Has something happened to Sutton?"

"No, no. Everything is fine."

"Let me guess. She stormed off and won't return your calls."

"Something like that. Have you heard from her?"

"I haven't seen or spoken to my daughter in weeks. By the way, thank you for the cruise. The Adriatic was amazing. You should take her sometime."

The sudden urge to confess, to shake this venal woman from her self-absorbed life, was overwhelming, and the words spilled from his mouth.

"She's gone, Siobhan. She left a note and walked out on me. I'm worried about her. She didn't take her things—her phone, her computer, her wallet are all here." As if that would explain it all.

And it did, enough at least that his mother-in-law reacted. "I'm on my way over," she said, and hung up on him.

Oh, bollocks. All he needed was Siobhan wandering the house looking for clues. Looking in the corners, at the dust and secrets.

You're an idiot, Ethan. Whyever did you tell her? That desperate, are we?

He poured himself a fresh cup of tea, looked around. Fuck cleaning up. So the place wasn't pristine. Who cared? Siobhan would find a flaw, a fault, no matter what. They could scour the place top to bottom, have it *Architectural Digest* photo-shoot ready, and she'd still want to move a vase or find a small part of the counter with a smear.

Siobhan Healy—*Shiv-awn*, for the uninitiated, which she delighted in sharing, loudly—took pride in being different. Her friends, and some of her enemies, Sutton included, called her Shiv for short. She was Sutton's opposite in every way. Looks: small and dark, Black Irish with her ebony hair liberally streaked

with gray, and cobalt eyes, face pinched and mean. Temperament: brash and extroverted; Siobhan adored attention, good or bad. Speech: lowbrow; though she didn't have an accent, she claimed she was from a Dublin slum and never hesitated to share the story of her continually upward journey.

She'd come to the United States and married a succession of men, each wealthier than the last. She was on husband four now, a meek-mannered man named Alan, who liked to make jokes, corny jokes—*hey, we should go into business together, call ourselves... Ethan Alan. Ha, ha, ha, ha, get it? Ethan Alan*—when he drank too much.

Ethan wasn't sure how this woman could have created her daughter, often wondered about their storied past, but Siobhan and Sutton both refused to ever talk about her childhood, or the one-night stand sperm donor who was her father. He wasn't, as Sutton said, one of the husbands. He was anonymous. Never around. Sutton had never met him.

Ethan found that wretchedly sad. His own parents had been kind, generous people, though he hadn't understood them well, nor they him. They were both gone now. They'd died quietly and unobtrusively four months apart when he was twenty-two. He'd been quite upset, but not devastated. They'd sent him off to Mount St. Mary's as a boarder when he was a wee lad, and he'd only seen them at breaks. Ethan had always been bookish; it was the school he attended that shaped his personality: cocky and wildly creative. It was a fine way to grow up, but Ethan wanted something different for his life. He'd always dreamed of a close-knit, exuberant household for his own family one day. Children running in the backyard, dogs playing and barking, a knockout wife, madly in love. Safe and stable.

The American Dream. That's one reason he'd moved to America, after all.

Safe and stable. He'd tried. Lord knew, he'd tried.

A text dinged. Ivy.

I haven't seen her or talked to her since I left on my trip. We chatted Thursday and she seemed fine. Do I need to come home? Do you need help?

Ivy, always the one willing to lend a hand, pitch in, make their lives easier.

He texted back. No, I'm sure she's just gone off to upset us all.

Ivy sent back an emoji that he took to mean "eye roll." He didn't understand emojis. Or text abbreviations. *LOL. BRB.* For God's sake, when had it become so difficult to actually use words anymore?

The doorbell sounded, impatient, as if it were being stabbed repeatedly with a thick finger—which of course it was. He opened the door for his mother-in-law, who sailed through like the *Queen Mary*, then turned on him. "So what did you do to upset my daughter now?"

Her dyed black hair was shoved under a dingy Nashville Sounds baseball cap; she was unkempt and smelled like stale liquor. She and the mister must have been hitting the bottle hard the night before. They liked to party, liked to hang out at their country club with other well-soused individuals, eating good food and drinking good wine and lamenting their fates. Such a lovely couple.

"I didn't do anything. I woke up this morning and she was gone. She left me a note."

"Show me."

Biting back the response he wanted to give, he instead led her into the kitchen and handed her the paper. She read it three times, lips moving as she did, and he wondered again how this dull, crass woman had created the glorious Titan he'd married.

Though during Sutton's bad times, the breakdowns, he saw bits of Siobhan in her.

Siobhan set the note down and crossed her arms on her chest.

“Where do you think she’s gone?” Her voice was curiously dispassionate, missing its usual aggression toward him.

He shook his head. “I was hoping you’d have an idea. I’ve called her girlfriends. They say they haven’t heard from her.”

“Did you tell them about the note?”

“I mentioned it to Filly and Ivy. I got the sense Filly might know something but wasn’t willing to say.”

She waved a hand. “Filly has always loved Sutton’s drama, and is hoping it will rub off on her. She’s a sad little woman living through everyone around her. She doesn’t know anything, or she’d already be here, glorying.” Siobhan played with the edge of the paper, sat down at the table.

“Sutton’s been in bad shape since the baby,” Ethan offered, almost unwilling to open that door. But he needed help, damn it.

Siobhan nodded, surprisingly grave. “Can you blame her?”

“Of course not. But I kept hoping... Siobhan, is there something else I should know? Did she tell you she was leaving me? You don’t seem terribly surprised by this.”

She gave a windy sigh that smelled suspiciously like dirty martinis. “Sit down.”

Ethan wasn’t used to taking orders in his own house, especially from a woman he wasn’t fond of, but he perched on a stool and set his hands on his knees. Siobhan watched him for a moment.

“When we spoke last, a few months ago, Sutton told me she was very unhappy. It wasn’t like her to confide in me. You know we don’t always see eye to eye about her choices.”

“If you mean how you suggested she leave me last year after Dashiell...I know. She told me all about it.”

“Do you blame me, Ethan?” That strange, dispassionate tone again. Almost as if they were confidants here, not enemies. “You treated her badly. You handled things poorly. She was in bad shape and you were too busy with your little fling to notice.”

His little fling. His stomach clenched. No one could know the truth there. It would destroy them all, Sutton especially.

“I made a mistake. I came clean, I apologized. We were getting things back on track. We’d talked about... We talked about moving, maybe, getting away from all the bad memories. Starting over.”

“Moving? Where?”

“Back to London.”

“I see. And Sutton was happy to do that?”

“We hadn’t made any concrete decisions. We were talking. Planning. The future... Bloody hell, Siobhan, at least she was talking to me again. You have no idea what the past year has been like, not really, for either one of us. It’s been torture. Oh, yes, we’ve put on a brave front. But once the door closed and the people disappeared, once the funeral was over and the neighborhood stopped tiptoeing around, we were left alone to try and muddle through. It was hell.”

“I can imagine,” she said, and she sounded almost like she cared. He knew she didn’t, not really. She was in it for the money. Siobhan and Sutton had a weird, twisted relationship, more like catty girlfriends who despised one another than mother and daughter. But despite all his advice, Sutton refused to cut her out completely. Ethan would never understand.

“I don’t care what Sutton told you, or didn’t. She’s been on edge lately, secretive. Something has definitely been going on with her. Do you know what she’s been planning?”

Sutton’s mother suddenly looked gray and old. “No. But her note doesn’t sound like someone who’s gone gaily off to do the Lord’s work. Why don’t you call the police? If you have nothing to hide...”

“Give me a break, Siobhan. I didn’t hurt her. It’s not like she’s a missing person, either. She left a note, after all. Besides, they won’t even take a missing persons report for seventy-two hours on an adult.”

“How do you know if you haven’t talked to them?”

“I do research my work, Siobhan.”

“For your books. Yes, of course.”

Oh, the disdain in her tone. Ethan tried not to place his very large hands around his mother-in-law’s neck. Siobhan had never understood the creative gene that he and Sutton shared. Sutton said Siobhan wanted her only child to find a rich man to marry, one who would allow her to play tennis at the club and host fabulous backyard garden parties. His temperament was optional. What were a few black eyes and broken ribs in the face of never-ending wealth and comfort?

They’d never told Siobhan how much Ethan was worth, how much he made on his novels. It was none of her business.

The uncomfortable silence grew between them. Finally, Siobhan stood.

“I’m sure she’s simply run off. She is always very dramatic when she gets upset.”

“And if she isn’t being dramatic?”

“You’re worried. I understand. You asked my advice, and here it is: Sutton’s been unhappy, and she probably doesn’t want to be found. But if you’re not content with that answer, call the police. Let them look for her.”

“You don’t seem very upset by the news that your daughter is missing. Or that she could have been harmed somehow.”

“Because I don’t think she’s missing. I think my daughter finally left you. Something she should have done long ago.”

“Thanks a lot, Siobhan.”

“You’re welcome. Now, my check? It was due today. If Sutton’s not here, perhaps you should see to it.”

And there it was. She didn’t give a flying fuck about Sutton, just wanted to get the money she wrenched out of them. That’s why she’d called, and then come over. Not to help. To take her cut.

Sutton generally handled the quarterly allowance she stubbornly insisted on paying her mother. It was a sore spot between

them; having Siobhan standing with her greasy paw out all the time nearly sent him over the edge.

“You must be joking.”

“I’m leaving town this evening. We have a trip to Canada. I’d like to deposit it before I go. And who knows when Sutton will resurface.”

“You are a seriously cold woman, Siobhan.”

“You have no idea.”

Ethan went to his office, pulled out the checkbook. He filled in the check, dated it, and stormed back to the kitchen.

“Here.” *If only I could lace it with rat poison and watch you die, you miserable, uncaring witch.*

“Thank you. Keep me apprised if she shows up, will you?”

“Why would I? You’ve made it quite clear you don’t care about Sutton, or about me. All you care about is your precious money.”

“I care more than you realize, Ethan. But you’re her husband. You do what you think is right.”

“I will. Trust me.”

As the door closed on her, she turned. “Ethan? Even after all these years, I don’t think you know my daughter at all.”

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