

# Between The Lies

Louise Tickle

The logo for the publisher cinto, featuring the word "cinto" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. A small grey circle is positioned above the letter "i".

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For Sylvia, my extraordinary, complicated  
and brilliant mother.

I wish your world had been different.

I try every day to make it so.



# Prologue

7 October 1998

The electric glare of a too-bright bulb bleaches the room. The backs of Cherry's legs sweat into the armchair he'd sat her in before getting started.

Her socks are damp and itchy and her red blonde hair is wet with tears. Her yellow party dress is soaked and reeks of pee from her accident earlier. The puddle, she observes, has spread across the carpet. Her mum is lying in it. Slumped on the floor, Marianne moans.

Cherry looks out from deep inside the armchair. Her eyes are doing something strange because everything in the room looks further away than usual.

She decides to count up what she can see.

Numbers one and two: clumps of her mother's hair, the blood drying now. One long red tress lies across Cherry's lap. The other is by the door. They had been hard to pull out and the noise had woken her brother which is why her mum and dad went upstairs. Her dad is still putting him back to bed. Number three: sunflowers and hot pink cosmos in a vase on the window sill. Four: a slick of blood across the floor, bright against the carpet.

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He'd got out a small grey knife with a triangle blade when he unpacked his bag. He'd told her mum not to make a single sound but she'd made such a scary scream that he'd had to come over to Cherry, two slashes on her cheek and he'd held her chin and done it fast. It bled so she tried to mop it with her skirt but it hurt so she stopped.

Her mum hadn't come to help. She'd wanted to. Cherry had seen her try. But then she couldn't anyway because he'd sat on her and she'd sunk in like a popped balloon. He'd used the grey knife again and her mum had breathed and breathed and managed not to make a sound, and then he'd held her hair scrunched in his hands and wrenched her head back and forward and blood flew everywhere, all over the living room and the telly, which was still on, and all over Cherry too. Then the hair came out, handfuls, and her mother did scream and Bill woke up crying and they'd both gone off upstairs to calm him down.

How many minutes later Cherry didn't know but Marianne had stumbled downstairs on her own.

Now, Marianne crawls. Grips her daughter's hand, raises her head, looks up through shallow breaths. Her mother hardly had a face now, Cherry observes, just grazed and broken skin and snot and hair cut off uneven which he'd done first, earlier, when he was shouting and angry. Before he calmed down and started properly.

Too hard to look. So I won't but I want my mum and I want to go back to the party and my cake in the shape of a nine with silver balls all over. When it was fun.

'Get out,' Cherry just hears her mum say, a sticky cough at the end. 'Tell him you need to go to bed. Open the window. Climb out.'

'Then run.'

'Run.'

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Dare to breathe? Dare to move? Unpeel my legs from the chair. Don't look. But I'm holding her hand. I'm holding her hand and she's holding my hand and to get to the door I have to let go.

Our fingers press.

My hand hot in hers.

How do I let go when I can't let go?

All I can feel is my hand inside her hand, holding me. I hold her hand back, hard. My fingers are strong. I stare at the door while I count. One, two, three, four, and five is my thumb which I squeeze to keep us together.

I am still, still, still.

Then I feel air on my hand.

Oh.

She's let go.

To the door.

Yes I'll be careful.

Up. To Bill's room, head round the door. He's kneeling next to Bill.

'Daddy,' Cherry says firmly. 'I need to brush my teeth. Then I need to go to bed.'





# Chapter One

May 2018

Hauling herself out of bed, Cherry Magraw saw through her window the first shreds of morning light. Her body ached for sleep. There was no traffic yet. A cat had walked past, and a fox, just after she'd woken the first time. She had watched the fox for a few minutes as it nuzzled at the recycling crates, wiped its nose along the wheelie bins, then disappeared in a flicker.

She padded on cold floorboards to the table. Her laptop screen glowed, open where she'd left it – Cherry looked at the clock – just over an hour ago. She read back what she'd written and cringed. Even those few lines were crass. What was she telling him that he didn't already know?

She felt chilled. Her feet and fingers were icy from the forty-five minutes she'd spent at the table, no socks or jumper, just in her t-shirt, trying and trying again to compose the email. This was way past the beginning of the end. The end had started ten months ago when Garth's wife had come home to him and the twins.

Cherry had told him they could no longer carry on. He'd agreed. They would each survive, they knew. She had survived, Cherry thought, but the daily effort was too much now that she could no longer sleep either.

She'd thrown herself into reporting on the violence that seethes behind closed doors, making herself the go-to journalist for editors who knew that misery and violence always sells. She'd been to

Bristol's courts so often the security guards barely glanced in her bag, waving her through as they did the lawyers and social workers who frequented the courts every day.

Her editors were pleased. At least, they kept commissioning her, which was the only feedback a freelance journalist could rely on.

Cherry had just published a feature about a young woman's sudden death which police had not recognised as murder and refused to investigate. As the weeks in which she had researched the story went on and each new police failing came to light, Cherry found her nights broken and her mind buzzing with frustration at the chances squandered to investigate a death she was sure was a crime.

She sighed and closed her laptop. Her article had forced the police to reopen the case. It was what the family had hoped for, and the best reporting could achieve. She should be feeling vindicated, professionally thrilled. Instead, her personal life was a shitshow and she was feeling bleaker than she could remember.

Grabbing a blanket off a squashy blue velvet sofa that dominated the room, Cherry wrapped it tightly round herself, tumbled into the softness of cushions and groaned. She had to find a way to tell Garth that she was going to up sticks and leave the country. She would pick up the itinerant life she'd once led reporting from the knife-edge tension of post-conflict states, in the swirling international community of here-today, gone-tomorrow aid workers, ex-military personnel raking in fortunes as private security, UN consultants of variable quality and freelance stringers like herself. The years she had spent travelling across these fragile new nations had introduced her to women and girls who had been raped as part of the wars they had somehow survived; it had fired Cherry's reporting and brought her to the attention of national news editors. It was also what had brought her back to Bristol two years ago, burnt out and knowing that, at least for a time, she needed to call a halt to stories of lives broken and sometimes obliterated by sexual violence. It hadn't worked, in the end – Cherry had been inexorably drawn back into these stories, and in the excitement of meeting Garth, she had been able to cope. But now, bereft and alone, it was too hard.

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She had to take action, had to move, had to do something. Somehow, somewhere, she needed to create a new start. So, the email to Garth was one she would have to send, and soon. But it needed more focus and equanimity than she could muster right now.

Cherry stretched her legs out against the sofa, digging her toes into its softness, trying to find some pleasure in the sensation. Eyes stinging, she drew her eyelids down and tried to conjure a place of calm. But she couldn't. She couldn't find peace.

No. Goddammit. If she couldn't sleep, she might as well get up, get out, and try to engage with the world beyond her laptop.

Cherry slung on her clothes, grabbed her backpack and walked down the two flights of stairs to the front door. She wheeled her bike quietly along the communal hallway of the terraced house which had been split into two flats, emerging into a faint dawn. Wishing she was at her family home on the Pembrokeshire coast, she hankered for the sea, but the Bristol Channel was as good as she was going to get now that her ancient car had finally succumbed to a total lack of upkeep. Why was she always so bloody skint?

As she clipped into her pedals Cherry thought wistfully of the lane from her family's farmhouse, Waun Olau, that would take her in less than half a mile to the cliffs of Ramsey Head and the churning, choppy waves below. The Severn estuary into which Bristol's River Avon debouched could be beautiful too, but it could never hold the drama of the jagged coastline which had anchored her childhood.

Picking up speed in an attempt to warm up, she headed west for the estuary. Depending on the tides she would soon be looking out over mudflats or, given the pink-tinged sunlight now breaking through from the east, a shining sheet of water stretching from England to Wales.

Cherry pumped her legs, grateful to be absorbed by the physical sensations of breathing and speed. On her bike she didn't have to think. If she cycled fast enough her whole attention was required. Cycling hard and fast, and rock-climbing, either outdoors or at the wall, had recently become her only relief from the visual flashes of

crime scene photographs and grisly details of abuse disclosed in interviews that increasingly punctured her nights. Why now, after years of doing these stories, she had wondered – before shutting down the thought.

Swooping down the Portway, traffic was already building under the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Cherry headed on towards the mouth of the river. Not wanting to engage with the industrial hardness of the port, she cycled across the Avonmouth Bridge alongside the rushing M5 motorway. Pale light was just striking the shallow intertidal waters that were, she saw, at their lowest ebb, hundreds of metres out to the west, by the Royal Portbury Docks. Massive red crane arms hovered waiting to swing containers from ship to land and back again.

As Cherry left the port behind, she glimpsed a footpath sign across the road from a line of pebble-dashed council houses perched on a high bank. Their windows looked out across the Severn estuary to the Brecon Beacon mountain range beyond, as yet invisible in the low light.

She'd stop here. Explore the estuary. Maybe a tramp along the mudflats would help her hold off sliding back into the misery of knowing she could not see Garth again, and had not managed to make a life for herself in Bristol without him.

Dumping her bike behind a clump of brambles, Cherry clambered along the shore and crouched low in the shingle, staring out. Waders, their spindly legs seemingly hinged backwards, picked delicately for invertebrates in the sticky grey mud. Exhaustion suddenly dragged at her again. The broken nights sapped her but the constant anxiety she now felt as a result, she knew, of her reporting, had made her brittle.

Her stomach clenched. She had to eat, and with the realisation of her need for breakfast, Cherry knew that her attempt at escaping the realities of the day was over. She didn't have the energy or the willpower for a walk. There'd be no adventure, no matter how small, today. Stomach gnawing, she pedalled lethargically back towards Avonmouth, wobbly on her bike.

Since she'd zoomed past, the port had rumbled into life and the bright yellow lights of a greasy spoon seemed to sizzle as she

approached. A workers' café, two shipping containers on a platform with steps up. She pushed through the plastic door into a welcome fug of warm, oily air.

'Bacon bap with fried egg, one coffee,' called the waitress to the man cooking but barely seen, out the back. She looked up at Cherry. 'Yes love?'

'Cappuccino,' said Cherry. 'And one of those baps please. With an egg.' Her Welsh lilt contrasted with the waitress's raucous tone.

The waitress nodded in the direction of the menu above the counter. 'No cappuccino. Black or white.'

Cherry spotted a glass jug on a hotplate and resigned herself to instant dressed up as filter. 'Black then.' She turned to face the café as the waitress turned to chivvy the chef.

A table of four lads in overalls, all in their early twenties, were applying themselves enthusiastically to plates filled to the edge. A man in a sweat-stained tracksuit scrolled through his phone as he forked pale scrambled egg into his mouth. A woman at a corner table, who had sat as far away as she could from the other customers, was weeping.

Cherry saw this with the internal jerk that accompanies witnessing a socially awkward situation play out.

The woman didn't fit the surroundings. A little older than herself, Cherry thought, mid-30s. Dark, shoulder length hair that was slightly dishevelled. An expensive pink wool coat that was both feminine and deliberate – not a colour you'd wear without meaning to. A light grey roll-neck jumper, slate grey suede boots. More at home in a chichi deli selling sourdough in Bristol's Montpelier or Clifton neighbourhoods than here in a dockers caff.

The woman's shoulders shook.

Cherry paused, then decided. She turned back to the counter. 'Another coffee please.' The waitress sloshed the dark, burned liquid into thick, white mugs.

Carrying both coffees, Cherry walked to the woman's table and stopped a pace away. Not too close. Lean out, not in.

'Coffee?'

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The woman half-looked up, then scrubbed a hand over damp cheeks and dug in her coat pocket for tissues that emerged in a clump. A child's sock fell on the floor together with a marble that rolled across the worn vinyl.

'Oh for Christ's sake.' The woman bent to pick them up but Cherry was there before her. She put the marble and the sock on the table.

'Thanks,' the woman said, stuffing them roughly back in her pocket. Her voice was clipped. A hint of aggression, Cherry thought. Or maybe embarrassment.

The woman's chest heaved. 'I'm always losing something.' She looked down, couldn't seem to raise her eyes from the smeared formica table. 'I can't even keep the bloody socks in pairs.'

'Hey,' said Cherry quietly, sitting down diagonally across the table. She nudged the mug across the table. 'It's hot. Might help.'

She watched the woman reach out and clasp the mug tightly as if trying to extract every scrap of heat and channel it up through her arms into her body.

Cherry watched as she tried to gather herself.

'Early to be out,' the woman managed through clenched teeth.

'Slept badly,' Cherry said. 'Some nights I wonder if I'll ever sleep again.'

The woman's eyes widened. Then she laughed. It came out as a hoarse bark. 'You and me both.' She picked up the mug more steadily this time, managed a sip. 'It's not very good.' A whisper of a smile.

Cherry grinned back. 'No. They need a decent coffee machine. Don't expect they'll get one.' She took a slug from her own mug. The woman was breathing more calmly now, she noticed, each sip seeming to revive her a little.

Cherry thought back to the sock. 'Girl or boy?'

The woman looked startled, then understood. She reached for her pocket, felt inside as if to reassure herself the sock was safely there.

'Girl,' she said. 'Lola. Seventeen months.' The woman looked up. Cherry saw her register the two faint scars across her cheek. There was always a moment. And she hadn't bothered to hide them this morning. 'And a boy. He's five.'

Then the woman ducked her head, but it wasn't with embarrassment at the scars. She was entirely bound up with her own story, and Cherry saw her mouth twist as she tried to regain control. A sigh shuddered out of her.

'They're with their dad,' she said. She waved a hand towards the grey rows of pebble-dashed council houses on the hill. 'Well, they're at his mum's. I'm picking them up in a minute. Though actually I've been here all night.' She took a gulp of coffee and closed her eyes.

'Here?' asked Cherry bemusedly.

The woman grimaced. 'No, my car.'

Cherry considered this. What would compel you to stay out all night in your car, here by the docks?

She felt a spurt of curiosity shoot through her. Deliberately, she retreated, leaning back in her chair. She had always been able to make herself small. Unthreatening.

The woman drew her pink coat around her, its collar high, her dark hair trapped inside, billowing over the lapels' edge. She shook her head, drew in a breath and glanced out of the window. The metallic sounds of a port coming to life jangled into the café. The woman turned back to Cherry, exhaustion paling her face.

'It's the kids' first night on their own with him. I don't think they're safe.' She paused. 'I mean with him. Not safe with him. I mean, I'm not safe with him. Why would they be?'

Cherry's attention tightened.

'People think I'm ridiculous. I know they do.' She sounded distant. 'But I know him. He holds them too hard when he picks them up. He does it to show me. To show me he can hurt me even if he's not got me. He's...' The woman spat the words out, 'angry with me. For reporting him to the police. For making him leave. So I stay close, in case...' She stopped again. 'In case.'

'Bacon bap with fried egg.' The waitress clanked over with Cherry's order and placed the plate on the table with a clatter.

'I don't know why I'm telling you,' said the woman abruptly, looking down.

Cherry smiled. 'It's fine.' She thought about whether to tell the

woman what she did for a living. People reacted in a variety of ways to the word 'journalist'. 'It's sort of my job.'

The woman glanced up. 'Oh?' Uninterested.

Cherry pointed at the floury bap in front of her. 'Half?'

The woman hesitated.

'Go on,' Cherry said. 'Might be better than the coffee.' She cut the bap in two and pushed one half over the table on a serviette.

'I'm Cherry,' she said.

The woman glanced up. 'Right.' She sipped her coffee, then shook her head, impatient with herself. 'Kathie. Sorry. I'm in a bit of state.'

The door was pushed open again and cold air rushed in around their ankles. A man encased in yellow oilskins ambled heavily to the counter.

Lean out, not in. Never crowd someone. 'You're all right,' Cherry said. Shift her away from the distress. 'I've never been to these docks. Everything's huge. Impressive.'

Kathie glanced around. 'Not so much in here.'

Cherry laughed. 'True. Though the bacon baps aren't bad.'

Reminded, Kathie looked down. 'Oh yes.' She took a bite, chewed, swallowed. 'It's good. Thank you. And sorry.'

As the café filled up and the chatter around them got louder, Kathie lost some of her stiffness. Yes, she worked. She was a translator. But she'd been off sick a lot since going back after Lola. Then, as if pulled back inexorably to the catastrophe unfolding in her life, she abandoned the standard social chitchat.

'I know everyone wants Ed to be able to see the kids on their own. 'Unsupervised contact' the lawyers call it.'

Cherry had nodded. She had spoken to a couple of mothers going through the family court process through her contacts at domestic abuse charities. And, she recalled, one father standing tensely outside the Bristol Family Justice Centre, who had been shaking and tearful. She'd followed him inside, slipped in at the back as his hearing started. His ex, he told the judge, had picked up their six-year-old daughter from school the Friday before and disappeared with her, on the weekend the little girl was meant to stay with him. His voice had



trembled at every word.

'I got an injunction after Ed... after last time.' Kathie stopped abruptly. Embarrassed, Cherry thought. She didn't want to say what he'd done.

'Anyway, I agreed in court that he could have them once a fortnight, just for the meantime. And one overnight, teatime to breakfast. But only at his mum's. I could see it would go badly with the judge if I said no.' Kathie stopped, tears suddenly threatening.

'I only went to the police at the very end.' She blinked. 'Stupid, stupid me. And now I've got to prove he's a risk or he'll get to have them on his own whenever he wants.'

Cherry felt a surge of interest. Family court cases were held in private – effectively in secret. Journalists were allowed to watch, but unlike in criminal trials where the press had the right to publish a blow-by-blow account of everything and anything that went on in court, the media was strictly banned from reporting a single word that was uttered in front of a family court judge.

Twice, she had applied for permission to report on the details of family law cases where a council had taken children into care; both times the judge had refused.

'Is anyone helping you?' Cherry asked.

Kathie laughed. 'Do you have any idea what lawyers cost? I had one for that hearing but I'm on my own now.' She blew her nose and looked at the clock. 'I need to head.' She looked at Cherry. 'You've been kind. In return, here's some advice. Don't ever end up in a family court against your ex. Because it's fucking brutal in there.' She picked up her bag, then swayed, eyes closed, lips pressed together.

'Are you all right?'

'Mmm. Low blood pressure. Takes a minute sometimes.' Kathie leaned against the table.

Cherry got up. 'How about I walk with you? Just to the car.'

How could she approach this, without it seeming just too weird? Cherry wondered. How could she ask to report on this woman's court case without frightening her off? And what on earth was she thinking?

She was meant to be getting out of Bristol. She was done with the city, she had acknowledged she could not cope being so close to Garth and yet so far from all she'd hoped for with him, and she knew the grimness of the stories she was investigating had, once again, become too much to bear.

But. She had never followed a domestic abuse case through the family court. And from the insights she had gleaned through reporting on domestic assault and rape in the criminal courts, she knew the powers wielded in family courts when children were removed from victims who could not prevent their abusers' violence, could change people's lives forever.

Awkwardly, as they reached Kathie's car, a smeared and dusty Ford Focus estate, Cherry rifled through her wallet and handed over her card.

'This is going to sound odd, but I'd really like to talk to you again. Professionally, that is.'

Kathie looked up from opening the door in distracted bafflement.

'Only if you want,' Cherry hurried on. 'You see, I'm a journalist.' She let it sink in. 'I write about situations like the one you're in. About safety. About risk.'

'Right.'

'I think your story's important.' Cherry thought fast. How to convince her it mattered. 'I'd want to describe how you're fighting for your kids. That you think they're in danger. That the judge might not believe you. And what happens if they don't.'

Kathie was staring at her.

'Sorry, I know you need to go.' Cherry stepped back, turned her bike towards the road. 'Will you think about it? If you want to find out more, give me a ring.'