



WIFE, MOTHER,
TEACHER, LIAR.

THE SHAPE
OF
LIES

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Prologue

He's watching her. He knows where she's going, what she's doing, but still he watches. She's inside now – out of his sight – but she'll be coming out soon. It's been thirty minutes, but he doesn't mind the wait. He leans his shoulder against the wall of a shadowed doorway, a spot he has stood in many times before, and thinks about who she is and what she's become.

Finally the glass doors of the apartment block swing open and she strides out, her head high, blonde hair gleaming in the overhead lights of the entrance. Even from here he can tell she is wearing deep red lipstick and dark eye make-up, and the skirt of her short dress swings around bare, tanned legs. He can't see the expression in her eyes, but he knows they will be burning bright with the thrill of the night ahead.

And he hates her for it.

He watches as people turn their heads to stare at this captivating woman who walks with such confidence in her strappy stilettos. They are probably wondering why someone so beautiful is on her own on the streets of Manchester.

She only has to cover a short distance to her destination, and he doesn't need to follow her, but he does anyway. He wonders if she can feel his eyes burning into her back, despising her for who she is, for the pain she has caused.

He hopes she can, because then she might be scared. And he needs that. He wants to see her fear – taste it. But not yet.

Soon.

Chapter 1

We all lie. To ourselves and to each other. We make excuses by referring to our untruths as fibs or white lies, trivialising them as harmless. Or we claim they are necessary to shelter others from hurt. However we try to justify them, whatever their shape or form, they are still lies.

Deception is a bigger word. Deceivers manipulate facts to create a false reality, like sleight-of-hand magic. There is nothing spontaneous about deception. It is carefully planned and skilfully orchestrated.

I lie to those closest to me every day, and each untruth plays its part in a greater deception. I am ashamed. I knew when I started on this journey that the path I had chosen was the wrong one, but the first lie slipped out easily and I convinced myself that I had no choice. I didn't realise then that a lie which I believed would harm no one would come with such a hefty price. I thought it was the only way to protect my family and hold it together. And as the deception increases in complexity, the pit I am digging grows deeper. I convince myself that it's nearly over, that soon I won't have to lie any more. Or at least not so often. But that's another lie – this time to myself.

Each morning as I wake up the first emotion to hit me is guilt, closely followed by shame. Today is worse than most. It's a special date for me, but I can't share its significance with anyone else. I have to bear the pain alone. My eyes fill with tears, and I allow myself a few moments to remember before I force myself from the safety of my bed. My chest feels tight, the urge to pull my knees up close and stay buried beneath the covers grows stronger, but my duplicitous nature urges me to paint a smile on my face and get on with the day.

I walk over to the window, pull back the curtains and look out over the golf course that lies at the back of our house. It's another beautiful morning, and on a day such as this the fairways will soon be full of men and women dragging their trolleys behind them, hitting a small white ball a hundred metres or so, only to trudge after it and hit it again. I don't get golf, but it's wonderful to see the beautifully cut grass, the artfully constructed ponds and the clumps of trees, which will be getting their autumn leaves before long.

We are lucky to have this house. It's a wreck, but when my husband inherited it from his uncle we could hardly refuse, and it allows us to be mortgage free. We will renovate it over time but it's taking longer than either of us expected, as no doubt these things always do.

I let the curtains drop back and head for the bathroom, squealing as a splinter goes into my foot from the floorboards that are waiting to be sanded back to their Victorian glory. The children aren't allowed out of their bedrooms without rubber-soled slippers, but I always forget. And it's my fault the floor is like this. In frustration at the lack of progress I ripped up the dirty old carpet two weeks ago, earning myself a rebuke from my husband, who has a plan that apparently I should have adhered to. He is a man who likes lists with items that can be ticked off in order as each one is completed.

The shower gives me time to take some deep breaths, and I stare into the mirror to reassure myself that no hint of my true feelings is showing. I see an unexceptional face: top lip slightly too long, a straight nose, and dark brown hair that waves to just below my chin. My oval-shaped navy-blue eyes are normally considered my best feature, but today they are puffy and I wish I could sink back into my bed with a couple of cold teabags on them for half an hour. But I can't, so I run a flannel under the tap and push it firmly against the offending skin in the hope that I will be able to work miracles with some make-up.

Finally I walk downstairs, picking my way past two bin liners stuffed with stripped-off wallpaper – another of my failed attempts to be helpful. I hear a giggle and look towards the open door to the kitchen, through which I glimpse the comforting scene of my children eating breakfast at a rickety Formica table under the watchful eye of my husband. He comes into the hall as he always does to make sure I have everything I need for the day ahead. I notice he is limping today, but I don't comment. I know he hates it.

I reach up an arm to wrap around his neck. 'You're so bloody *tall*,' I say, pulling his face down towards mine and resting my lips briefly on his. It's true – he is. And his wide shoulders look as if they are made to be leaned on. If only I could.

'Morning, short stuff.' He smiles and kisses me back.

I straighten the jacket of the smart new suit I bought for days like today when I have an important meeting and strike a pose. 'Do I look okay?'

'You look gorgeous – ready to conquer the world.'

Dominic always does his best to make me feel good. He hasn't worked for eighteen months, since the event we euphemistically call his 'accident', and is perfectly content to be a stay-at-home dad, caring for the children and gradually restoring the house. He says he has no desire to return to teaching, but I suspect he underestimated the time needed to care for two small children.

I used to be the polar opposite of my unambitious husband. When I was eighteen I wanted to fly, to jump every hurdle in my path, to be everything I possibly could be. But that lust for life brought me nothing but turmoil, and I learned to value stability and a life free from uncertainty. Sometimes, though, I strive to free a tiny portion of myself from the confines of a life constrained by the codes of others.

I step towards the kitchen to say goodbye to my children, and speak to Dom over my shoulder. ‘You were up early this morning. Couldn’t you sleep?’

‘I was too hot. I think my next job has to be sorting our bedroom windows so we can at least open them and get some air in the room. It was stifling. Sorry I woke you, but I knew I wouldn’t get back to sleep so I went for a walk – you know it helps in the morning.’ He’s following me, so I stop at the door and turn.

‘I heard the car go. How’s your leg feeling?’

‘Not too bad, although I probably walked too far. I decided to drive to the park for a change of scenery. It was just before six when I got there and there was no one else around. It was perfect.’

‘Sounds lovely.’ I walk into the kitchen. ‘Now, where are those gorgeous children of ours?’

Most of the time I find it easy to play the part of the perfect wife in a perfect family, but occasionally it feels hard to know which is the charade and which is my reality – this life, with the children I love dearly, or the secret life in which I play the starring role.

I hurry over to the table. It’s time I was on my way, but I can’t resist kissing Holly over and over on her cheek until she pushes me away with a giggle. I spin towards Bailey and lift his chubby little hand to lick the honey off his fingers before he smears the sticky goo all over my clothes.

‘I’ll see you kids tonight. Have a wonderful day,’ I shout as I head for the front door.

I turn back briefly in the doorway, give Dominic a final cheery wave and walk towards my brand new raspberry-red car, groping in my handbag for the keys.

I’m about to reach for the handle when I stop dead. Just in time I’ve seen what’s on the window, only inches from where I was about to put my hand. I want to turn and run, but I know I should stand still and wait until the source of my fear flies away. It doesn’t look as if it’s going anywhere, though, and I stare transfixed at the yellow and black stripes, the slender body pinched in just below the fine wings. I know where its stinger is, and I’m told that only

female wasps can sting, but I don't know how to tell the difference and I don't care. They are all enemies to me.

For a second I think the wasp is about to leave as it lifts itself from the glass and buzzes around for a few moments. But it settles back down. I feel as if it's playing with me, waiting for me to swat at it so it has an excuse to attack.

I hear Dominic shout from the open door, 'Hang on, Anna.' I can't look at him, but he'll be glancing over his shoulder to check the children are still eating breakfast. I hear the irregular beat of his footsteps hurrying towards me and feel his fingers on my arm. He reaches out a hand holding a handkerchief. He pauses, and then he lunges and I give a little yelp of fear.

'Got it,' he says with a note of satisfaction. He turns and smiles. 'You're good to go, darling.'

I can breathe again, but somehow the sight of the wasp feels like an omen. I still haven't moved.

Dominic opens the car door for me. 'Do you need to come back in the house for a few minutes? Are you going to be okay?'

For a moment my mind turns blank, but then I shake myself. At least Dominic never laughs at me; he has even researched the problem. 'Speksophobia – that's what fear of wasps is called,' he'd told me when he first saw the level of my panic.

I was stung three times as a child, and have hated and feared wasps ever since. But that doesn't account for the paralysing terror I feel now. I can never explain it to Dominic. The trauma of the moment I became truly speksophobic was far worse than he could ever imagine.

Sadly not everything can be solved by Dominic with a handkerchief and a bit of love and attention. Some things demand so much more, and the thought of the secret mountain I need to climb sneaks up on me. I feel my throat tighten. More lies, more deceit.

There are times I can't wait for it to be over, and at other times I never want it to end.

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