

PRAISE FOR *GRAVE DOUBTS*

‘A meticulously plotted novel that is deeply
unsettling’

The Scotsman

‘From the outset, this disturbing crime thriller
grabs you and doesn’t let go... Chilling’

Bookshelf

‘If you fancy a thrill-packed suspense story that
will have you burning the midnight oil to find out
what happens next, then this is the one for you’

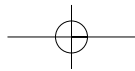
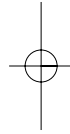
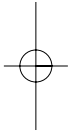
Peterborough Evening Telegraph

‘Unusual and intelligent...described with great
subtlety. The detection element is cleverly done
and the story genuinely exciting’

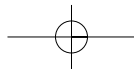
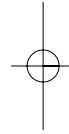
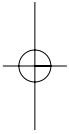
Jessica Mann, *Literary Review*

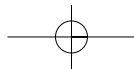
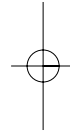
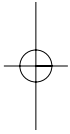
‘Chilling...disturbing...compelling’

shotsmag.co.uk



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ELIZABETH CORLEY

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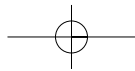
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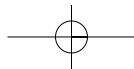
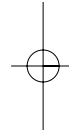
ELIZABETH CORLEY was born and brought up in West Sussex. Married, with a stepdaughter, she manages to balance her passion for crime-writing with a successful position as Chief Executive, Europe for a global investment company, dividing her time between London, Germany and France. A one-time committee member and vice-chairperson of the Crime Writers' Association, Elizabeth is an active member of the organisation yet still finds the time to pursue her outside interests of travel, gardening and music. Her previous titles include *Requiem Mass* and *Fatal Legacy*.

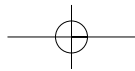
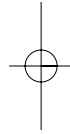
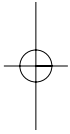
Also by Elizabeth Corley

Fatal Legacy
Requiem Mass



*For Kathleen and Robert.
With love.*





FEBRUARY

He watched the woman from his hiding place deep in the bushes. It would be dark soon and the remaining occupants of the park would leave. The chill evening and threat of rain had driven most away already but he knew that she would wait because she had an appointment, with him.

It pleased him that he had this power over her. The first time he'd suggested that they meet she'd been eager. She had lingered in the rain for nearly an hour while he waited in the warmth of his car. When she finally gave up he'd followed her home, delighting in the glimpse of her long calves as they flashed from the confines of her winter coat. He should have taken her soon afterwards, that had been the dare. Instead he'd hesitated. Hours of delay had turned into days, days into a week. He let opportunities pass, happy enough with his fantasies and the pleasure of anonymous proximity. He had brushed by her in the street, smelt her perfume and pondered over her solitary, idle existence. She never went to work.

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After a week his points were forfeit. He should have abandoned her and moved on to someone else. Instead he'd asked her out for a second time, something he had never done before but she was special. He knew that she'd be better than all the rest, worth the danger, and the punishment he was risking because of his disobedience. It was forbidden to go back for the same woman twice, completely against the rules.

He glanced at his watch, pulling down the cuff of new leather gloves to study its luminous dial. Not long now. Slowly colour drained from the sky leaving it ashy and featureless, like the underbelly of a great bird of prey that was circling the earth, waiting. The woman was pacing now, stamping her feet to keep warm in the chill winter evening. He studied her clothes: the long black coat concealed her figure but he knew what she looked like. With the aid of binoculars he had penetrated the privacy of her bedroom. Stupid woman, to imagine that because she lived on the top floor it was all right to leave her curtains askew. He'd seen glimpses of pale skin, the pink of a nipple and once perhaps the dark suspicion of pubic hair. In her rubbish he'd found discarded underwear and kept it, breaking another rule. *'No traces.'* If his souvenir were discovered he would be in serious trouble.

He was only a pupil, learning from a master who was uncompromising about the rules of the game he had invented. Normally he obeyed them but

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with her the temptation had been too strong. Otherwise he was an adept pupil, becoming more skilled every time. This one would be his best, he was certain. Perhaps tonight he might...even...kill her.

Just thinking the words made him shake. He knew that it was what was expected of him and that, until he had proved himself, there would be secrets unshared. He wanted those secrets badly. Once he had them he would truly belong.

The young man shuddered in anticipatory pleasure. His breathing grew faster, the excitement bringing an uncontrollable flutter to his throat. He imagined closing his hands about her neck and heat spread through him.

‘No!’ It was a hiss through clenched teeth. He despised his lack of self-control. It was always over too quickly, not like... He stopped the thought. Once he began making comparisons his confidence would evaporate, like before.

At last. The courting couple on the bench at the far side of the rose garden stood up to go, glancing at the solitary woman as they passed. She was worth a second look. Pale, perfect skin, full lips that would burst in his mouth like ripe fruit as he bit into them, and hair so black it would bury his darkest thoughts.

He started to flex, stretching to ease his muscles so that he would be fast and strong. Streetlights came on beyond the stone wall, spilling deeper

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shadows in pools across the gardens and into the park. His hiding place in the leaves grew darker. When she finally gave up she would have to walk along the flagstones towards him and his ready hands. He stepped a few inches closer to the path and waited.

She looked at her watch again. He wasn't coming. Relief and disappointment battled within her and relief won. Accepting this blind date had not been her idea. Others had put her up to it and she'd fallen victim to their persuasion. When he stood her up the previous week she'd hoped that it would mark the end of her being the butt of other people's bright ideas. Then he had emailed her again with a new time and place and here she was, feeling a fool.

An easterly wind whipped across the grass throwing scraps of dead rose petals against her legs. She'd waited long enough. It was time to admit that he wasn't coming and go home. As she turned to retrace her steps the young woman looked around her, hoping to find others still in the park, but she was alone. She pulled her thick woollen coat tighter and wrapped her arms across her chest against the encroaching night. Her shadow walked before her along the flags, a comforting companion that promised lights and safety in the darkening night. It disappeared as she turned onto a path where tall bushes flanked a tunnel through shrubbery.

Some vandal had smashed the bulbs in the

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ornamental lamps that were supposed to light her way. Her boots crunched on newly broken glass as she walked, more quickly now. The wind was tormenting the shrubs that enclosed her, mimicking the rustle of predators in the night. Her shoulder blades twitched and she started a funny half-trot, eager to reach the safety of her car.

He was on her without warning. A dark shape leaping out and covering her mouth before she could scream. They went down together, his weight on top of her driving the air from her lungs and with it any ability to cry for help. The back of her head struck the ground and she blacked out for a second. When she forced her eyes open his masked face was inches from hers, a black leather horror that showed only his eyes and mouth. He was biting at her shoulders that were somehow bare. Her coat had been ripped open and the neck of her jumper torn.

‘No!’ She yelled as loud as she could, disappointed that the sound was so pathetic. ‘Get off me, you bastard!’

She aimed a punch at his head but he slapped her hand away and brought up a knife from nowhere. *He wasn’t meant to have a knife, no one had warned her about that.*

‘Shut up, bitch. Stay quiet and you might live.’

She tried to concentrate on his voice, to memorise the accent and cadence so that she would make a good witness, but fear dominated her mind making it hard to concentrate.

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'Get off!' She cried out again, appalled at the tears on her face. When his hands went for her bra she fought like a wild thing, terrified of what he would do when he found what was hidden beneath. She managed to scratch his face near the eye and felt skin beneath her nails. DNA, but that would be a hollow victory if they scraped it from her corpse.

He gave up on her breasts and ripped open her jeans, using the knife to slice through the fabric in his hurry. Somehow his trousers were already undone and he rubbed himself against her. At the touch of his flesh she screamed loudly, a sound of terror, despite the threat of the knife at her throat. Surely someone must come soon. Her thighs were locked tight against his groping fingers and the beating of his fist. He jabbed the blade against her neck.

'Stop fighting me or you die. Open your legs!'

She ignored him, clamping her knees together as he punched her thighs. The pounding grew harder and seemed to radiate up from the stones beneath her. Then there were other noises, shouts, bright lights and his weight was lifted away. She kept on shouting, unable to comprehend that the threat was over.

Her shaking body was wrapped in a plastic sheet and bags were placed over her fingers routinely, as if she were already dead. Hands reached for her out of the lights.

'No.' She shook them away. People stood back.

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‘Was there any penetration, Nightingale?’

‘What?’ She stared at the familiar face in disbelief.

‘Was there any penetration? It’s just that if there was we’ll need a urine sample. It’s routine procedure, Sergeant.’

She heard a voice mutter *‘for God’s sake,’* as she brought up her fist in a swing that connected with a satisfying crack on the side of Detective Inspector Blite’s jaw.

‘You bastard!’

Somewhere, somebody laughed.

‘Wayne Griffiths you are under arrest...’

The words reached him from across the grass as he watched them take his friend away. He’d been in hiding for hours, long before Wayne and the woman arrived. His plan had been simple: to observe and critique Wayne’s latest efforts to graduate into his world. But now the boy was gone and there was nothing he could do to save him. He was angry and confused. The capture had reversed his sense of world order. How had this happened? How had the police traced Wayne? That woman, who was she? They’d called her ‘Sergeant’ – was she police? How could the boy have been so stupid?

He’d succumbed to the oldest trick in the book, to grow so fixated on a woman that he’d fallen into her trap. Admittedly she was almost perfect but part of the testing was to build up immunity to their

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enchantments and his pupil had disappointed him. If it hadn't been for her...he stopped the thought. There wasn't time for regrets.

He needed to reach the flat and clear up before the police found out the address. If he removed all traces there was still a chance that the evidence would be too weak to gain a conviction. There were ways to destabilise even a strong case, particularly if it depended on a sting by the police. Provided there was no other evidence a good defence should be able to plant sufficient seeds of doubt in a jury's mind.

He had the money and contacts to arrange the best legal advice available. It would be a show of support, not that he had any concerns about his partner's loyalty; it was absolute. But he wouldn't seek bail. Some punishment was appropriate for such stupidity and a long wait in prison might teach the boy a much-needed lesson.

Meanwhile he would disappear. He'd have to go away until the trial. If and when the prosecution collapsed, they could be reunited and resume elsewhere.

Satisfied that he was once more in control, the watcher sprinted away across the grass and disappeared into the night.