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A Thousand Lies

Laura Wilson

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Michael Farrow skirted the cricket pitch and sweated his way across Monken Hadley Common in the wake of his spaniel. As he went he cursed, in strict order of priority, the dog for needing a walk, his wife for wanting the dog in the first place, his children for providing the pretext for wanting the dog, and then the stinking hot July weather, his fatness, his headache, the bottle of red wine he'd had with last night's dinner and the brandies he'd consumed in front of the TV afterwards, and then – to round things off – the world in general.

It was all right for Honour, she'd grown up with dogs. Five of the things, rampaging round her parents' Dorset rectory and ramming their noses in his crotch whenever he visited. To be fair, it was usually Honour who took care of the walking and feeding, but this weekend she'd gone off to Hampshire to see an old friend, and, faced with the choice of entertaining Harry (four) and Eleanor (two), or traipsing through the wood with Gertie, he'd chosen the latter. At least it gave him a bit of peace and Eva the au pair had seemed happy with the arrangement – she didn't like the dog much, either. Shame Eva wasn't better looking, really. Not that he'd ever ... and she probably wouldn't, even if he ... All the same, Czech girls were supposed to be knockouts, weren't they? Like all those models. Trust Honour to pick a moose. Surely a pretty one wasn't too much to ask, especially as he was paying through the nose for it. Like the bloody house. He turned back and squinted across at the elegant Georgian building with its portico and wisteria-clad wall. That was costing a fortune, too, the upkeep. At least he was going up to Scotland for a few days' golf with the boys

on Wednesday – he'd insisted on that when Honour dropped her bombshell about leaving him alone with the kids for the whole weekend.

He turned round. Gertie was nowhere to be seen. That was all he needed, to lose the bloody dog. Not that he'd have minded, of course, but he'd never hear the last of it from Honour, and the kids were bound to start howling, and . . . Oh, sod it. 'Gertie!' That was loud enough – several of the cricketers near the pitch boundary had turned round to look – but the dog did not re-appear. Swearing, he hitched up his shorts and lumbered off towards the wood.

It took a good ten minutes of calling and tramping through nettles and once nearly getting his eye poked out by a low branch, before he spotted the black-and-white rump bobbing about among the trees. 'Gertie! Come here! *Now!*'

The dog continued to ignore him. Plunging after her through the undergrowth, he noticed piles of fresh earth. Must have been work done here, he thought – the council, probably. Hadn't Honour been going on about a swamp or something?

He came to the edge of a clearing. More piles of earth, a hastily erected wood-and-wire fence and a notice confirming that Barnet Council were carrying out drainage works and warning him to *Keep Out*. Gertie must have crawled in underneath somehow, because she was scrabbling at something in a deep ditch, earth shooting out on either side of the blur of her stumpy tail.

'Gertie!' He went past the sign, hauled himself painfully over the wooden palings and bent down to grab her collar. She turned her head and snapped at him. He twisted the leather and yanked the snarling, choking dog back up to ground level. After a struggle, he attached her lead and slapped her, hard, on the bottom, but still she strained away from him, front paws beating at the air in the direction of the ditch.

He tugged the lead – for a small dog, Gertie was surprisingly strong – and began to drag her back to the fence, but his foot caught against a tree root and he lost his balance. He grabbed for the fence, but the dog made a frantic lunge towards the ditch, wrong-footing him so that he fell, heavily, onto his back,

dropping the lead. Freed, Gertie bounded back into the ditch. Farrow groaned and levered himself into a sitting position. He just had time to blink before a scoop of earth thrown up by rummaging paws hit him full in the face. 'Shit!' He swiped at the muck around his eyes and lunged forwards to grab the end of the trailing lead. It was at that point that the dog moved sideways and Farrow got a glimpse of what she was trying to unearth. It was the skeleton of a human foot.

CHAPTER TWO

'You're next,' Amy Vaughan told her reflection. She was sitting in a traffic jam on the Western Avenue, staring at herself in the rear-view mirror. Her eyes – the only bit she could see properly in the rectangle of glass – were dark blue, long and narrow with thick black lashes, and they looked tired and unhappy.

That was the thing about the death of a parent, especially one of the same sex: it put you right in the firing line. It didn't matter whether you'd got on or not, they were still the person who stood between you and the inevitable, and when they were gone it was your turn and there was nothing you could do about it. Everything would be so much easier, Amy thought, if I just knew where to find Dad. She'd tried to track him down in time for the funeral, but he seemed to have disappeared, which was, she had to admit, consistent – he had a knack of being unavailable during a crisis. In her darker moments during the last couple of weeks Amy had wondered several times if he was dead as well, and his current 'wife' (always their description, never his) either hadn't chosen to contact her, or – if he'd moved on since the last woman she'd met – hadn't known of her existence.

That aside, her mother's funeral had – all things considered – gone fairly well. What Amy had been dreading most was the next bit: clearing out her mother's flat. She'd put it off for a week already: she'd had to finish a long article about miscarriages of justice for the *Sunday Times*, and she was putting together another book proposal, and she'd spent half a day with her head under the sink, dismantling things because it wasn't draining properly, and . . . She knew she could have gone on

adding to the list for ever, so, on Monday afternoon, she'd gritted her teeth, packed an overnight bag, and driven across London.

The lights changed from red to green and back again several times, but the junction was jammed and the lines of cars didn't move. Amy stared out at the pitiless landscape of concrete and steel and corrugated iron and tried to work out where the house she'd lived in as a child – demolished in 1996 to make way for a never-built flyover – had stood. This wasn't a much happier subject, but at least the speculation took her mind off where she was (or rather, at the moment, wasn't) going, and the fact that she was slowly suffocating inside the sweltering car. She cranked down the window in an attempt to get some relief from the heat, but the exhaust fumes from the lines of trapped, frustrated vehicles seemed to bind the humid air to her skin. She wound it up again and turned to the Evian bottle on the passenger seat. It was warm to the touch – no relief there. She fluffed her short black ringlets away from her sticky neck, undid her safety belt and plucked at her sweaty T-shirt, trying to peel it away from her body, then gave up and slumped over the steering wheel, staring at the huge hoardings that lined the road, advertising cars that were newer and better and shinier than hers. The vision of speed and air-conditioned comfort was humiliating. I'm thirty-four, she thought, and I'm still driving a junk-heap. Bad thought – tempting fate: if the bloody thing decided not to start when the traffic ahead began to crawl forward she'd probably get lynched. 'Sorry, car,' she muttered. 'I didn't mean it.'

The Suburb that Failed. That was how Amy had always thought of the place where she'd grown up. This is the Family that Failed who lived in the House that Failed in the Suburb that Failed. She hadn't been in the least surprised to learn that the entire row was being condemned. The Vaughans had moved into one of the Tudorbethan semis in 1974, when Amy was three, and her Dad had upped sticks six months later, leaving her and Mum with only the traffic for company. Admittedly, the cars – less than ten feet from their front garden – hadn't been too bad at first, but by the time Amy left for university in

1987, the endless rumble had made the window glass vibrate and coated it in greasy filth. When it rained, the spray flung up by the lorries turned everything brown. Amy remembered how she used to stare out of her bedroom window at the road below, watching the cars pass by en route for more desirable places, and promise herself that, as soon as she could, she would follow them.

And she had. Patti Vaughan, for some reason (nostalgia? stubbornness? masochism?), had chosen to remain on this congested, mismanaged stretch of tarmac. The A40 arterial road! Amy snorted. Anyone with an artery as badly clogged as this would have a heart attack within minutes . . . Unlike her mother, whose cancer (whether caused by heavy metals or some interior pollutant) had begun at fifty-seven and taken three and a half years to kill her. Initially, Patti had refused to move, even after the Department of Transport had served her with a notice of eviction, and the last time Amy had visited her at the old place, the row of once-neat houses had become the gutted backdrop to a landscape of feral mattresses, graffiti, nettles and broken glass. A year later, it had vanished, and Patti had grudgingly allowed herself to be installed a few miles up the road in a block of flats called Wendover Court.

The cars began crawling over the junction, then picked up speed before hurtling down towards Gipsy Corner. Amy threaded her way across to the outside lane where she drove along as slowly as she dared, trying to identify the turning. If she took the wrong one, she'd be lost for hours in a low-rise, primary-coloured landscape of warehouses, car showrooms and cul-de-sacs. Built in the thirties and miraculously undemolished, Wendover Court was the last remaining residential building on an industrial estate.

Amy found the right turning and parked. Then she peeled herself off the car seat, locked up, and climbed to the fourth floor, where she let herself into her mother's flat. The narrow, windowless hallway was dingy, and as Amy stepped forwards her knee thumped against something hard – a cardboard box, open and full of books. When she turned on the light, she saw that the topmost title was hers: *The Coffin Dodgers* by Amy

Vaughan. Picking it up, she turned to the title page and saw her handwriting: *To Mum, with love and best wishes from Amy xxx*. The spine was unbroken. That wasn't particularly surprising – Patti had never been much of a reader, and Amy had to admit that her account of six months' working in various care homes for the elderly (*A compelling indictment of society's failure to address a growing social problem*) wasn't everyone's cup of tea. A sudden suspicion made her bend over for a look at the side of the box. Across the slogan for Walker's crisps was scrawled, in thick black marker, the single word *CHARITY*.

'Thanks, Mum.' Amy squeezed past the box to the kitchen. The books were obviously part of a last, aborted clear-out before her mother went into the hospice for good. She must have had some help, Amy thought, because she'd have been far too frail to lug boxes around on her own. Amy'd had no reason to visit the flat since her mother had entered the hospice, since all the things that Patti Vaughan had needed for the last few weeks of her life – nightclothes, toothbrush, even her Will – had gone with her.

Surely she couldn't have left the book there deliberately, Amy thought. What *are* you supposed to do with your daughter's book if you know you've only got a short time left? Give it back? 'Stop making excuses for her,' she said, aloud. Her mother had known exactly what she was doing. *She thought I'd betrayed her and she couldn't forgive me, even when she was dying*. Face facts, Amy told herself – drugs or no drugs, Patti had known damn well who'd have to clear up after her, and she'd wanted it to hurt.

Amy took a deep breath and looked round the little kitchen. The bare worktops were covered in a fine layer of dust, and the place smelt musty. Five or six flies were circling aimlessly beneath the light fitting. Amy opened the window and took a pace back, almost deafened by the roar from the road. She closed it quickly and stood wondering where to start. She felt as if the flat itself was against her – there was something malevolent about the place. She'd spent the last week imagining finding her head slashed out of photographs by furious scissors, her few letters and postcards defaced with vicious scrawl, or

turning on the stereo to a tape of curses: *You came between us, I wish you'd never been born* ... Stop it, she thought. Don't cry. Keep calm. I'm going to put my head down and get through this, she told herself. I'm not going to get upset. Whatever happens, whatever I find, she is not going to win.

She went down to the car to pick up her groceries and overnight bag. Despite the humidity and the constant whiplash noise of passing cars, the air seemed fresh in comparison with the flat. When Amy had learnt that she was her mother's sole beneficiary, she'd thought there must have been a mistake, but when she discovered that all she was to have sole benefit of were a few sticks of cheap furniture and an unsaleable flat, it had made more sense. She'd have to put the place on the market at a bargain price and hope that someone was desperate enough to get on the housing ladder ... If I'm lucky, she thought, looking up at Wendover Court, I might clear enough to pay off a chunk of the mortgage and – she glanced round guiltily at her car – buy something decent to drive.

She climbed back up to the flat. The fridge, she discovered when she went to unload her food, was switched off but not emptied. She dropped a bag of brown, liquefied lettuce into the bin, then turned her attention to a carton of near-solid milk. She upended it over the sink and tried not to gag as the contents flopped out onto the plughole and stayed there until she broke up the quivering, off-white mass with the handle of a wooden spoon.

She decided to make a start in the bedroom. It was at the back, as far away from the bad milk smell as possible, and the window could be opened without quite so much din, apart from the trains rattling past on the tracks behind the block. Patti Vaughan's bedroom was pink, dusty, thickly carpeted, and very hot. Amy had the feeling that her mother was somehow present, lingering on in the backs of drawers and behind the rails of clothes in the wardrobe. She looked at the old-fashioned phone crouched on the bedside table and felt a sudden conviction that if she lifted the receiver her mother's part in every conversation they'd ever had would issue from it – the

flat, cold denials, the shouted accusations, the whining emotional blackmail . . . She bent down, yanked the plug out of the jack, and trussed the phone in its own cord. 'That's shut you up,' she said. Beside it was the carved wooden box full of Patti's jewellery: huge dark beads, chunky bracelets and heavy silver rings. There was only one item she didn't recognise, in an oblong leather box with satin lining: an old-fashioned silver dress watch, far more delicate than the other items. She took it out and wound it, holding it to her ear to see if it still worked. She held it, momentarily, against her wrist, but the tiny tick seemed too much like a last weak echo of Patti's own pulse. Telling herself not to be ridiculous, she put the watch to one side. It looked as if it might be an heirloom, and she ought to keep one thing, at least.

Working fast, she upended drawers of clothing into bin-liners without so much as a glance at the contents. Then she turned her attention to the wardrobe, shucking armfuls of long dresses in swirling Indian fabrics, loon pants and gaudy blouses off their hangers and stuffing them into the bags. Those could go to the charity shop – with the boxes of books, there wouldn't be room in the car for the rest. She lugged the bags into the kitchen so as not to get mixed up, and set to work on the shoes and handbags. Then she went through to the bathroom, emptied the contents of the cabinet into the miniature swing-bin and added that to the rubbish pile, together with the towels, the bed-linen and the bath mat. After a couple of hours, the hall carpet was entirely covered in bulging black plastic, and she began hauling the bin-liners out and down the stairs for the dustmen. By the time she'd finished it was nearly eight o'clock and she was limp and gritty with sweat and dust.

She went into the bathroom to wash her hands and splash her face with water, before getting herself a beer. At least she'd got rid of most of the things – good job it was only a one-bedroom flat. The house clearance people were coming tomorrow, for the furniture and pots and pans, but she'd wanted to dispose of all the other stuff herself. The act of bagging it and putting it out for the bin men had felt like a sort of exorcism. Now that

most of the personal items were gone, the atmosphere in the flat seemed to have lightened a bit.

Even with the window shut she could hear the muffled whoosh-whoosh of the traffic. Amy felt an intense, almost savage, pleasure that the cars were eroding the landscape of her childhood. There had been a slightly wistful moment this afternoon when she'd noticed that the shop at Western Circus, where she'd spent her pocket money on Love Hearts and Fab ice lollies and *Jackie* magazine, was boarded up. *Jackie* magazine! She wondered how its agony aunts, Cathy and Claire, would have dealt with her problem, even if she'd been able to identify what it was, and – more to the point – admit it to herself. Cathy and Claire would have thought she was making it up to get attention: the worst thing a mother could do in the *Jackie* universe was to stop you wearing high heels or embarrass you by picking you up from a party at 9.30. And even if someone – not Cathy and Claire, necessarily, but anyone – had believed her, it would have meant the fate worse than death: being *taken into care*.

Swiping angrily at the tears that pricked her eyes, Amy, collected more bin-liners and went into the sitting room. Most of the work had already been done: the shelves of the bookcase were bare, and a row of boxes marked *CHARITY* lined one wall. The cupboard with the CDs and videos had been cleaned out, and a paper carrier bag full of records was propped against the fireplace. In the middle of the coffee table there was a large rectangular chocolate box. Over the embossed curlicues of Terry's All-Gold had been stuck a white label: *AMY*.

The defaced photographs, the tape of her mother's final denunciation . . . Mouth dry, Amy hesitated. She didn't want to touch the box, much less take the lid off. She glanced at the roll of bin-liners she'd left on the bookcase. She could always throw it away without looking. But supposing there was a letter – an explanation – an apology – a stab at the truth, even? She'd be throwing away her only chance for some sort of reconciliation, even if it was posthumous . . .

The hope that had flared inside her died almost immediately. It's impossible, she thought. Dying, her mother had turned

away from her. Every time Amy had come to see her, she'd looked up, hoping for Dad, but when she'd seen her daughter she'd turned her face to the wall. Flashes of herself pleading with her mother came at Amy like shards of flying glass: *I'm doing my best to find him.*

One whispered word: *Liar.*

Please, Mum, don't do this.

Liar.

In spite of all the drugs, Patti had been lucid enough to hate, and even when her speech had left her she'd still turned away. Nevertheless, thought Amy, I have to open this box, or it'll drive me mad. Her mother's last, hoarse words rasped through her head. *Liar. You're keeping him from me. Liar.*

Hands shaking, she picked up the box and lifted the lid.

CHAPTER THREE

Amy sat down on the carpet and examined the contents. Sellotaped to the inside of the lid was a white envelope with the words *George* and *Private* written across it in large letters. It was sealed with another piece of Sellotape, and had *Private* written again across the back. Amy turned her attention to the rest of the box, which contained a brown paper parcel and two photograph albums, one labelled *Patti & George*, the other labelled with her own name. Exiled to photographic Siberia. Oh, great. Amy sat on the floor, opened the first album and started turning the pages. Mum and Dad looking glamorous at the races, romantic at a restaurant, sun-tanned on a beach, he handsome, she beautiful, very Burton-and-Taylor, right down to Mum's long black hair and Cleopatra eye make-up. You'd have thought it was a record of a couple's life together, even though Dad had probably spent a total of less than two years with Mum – on and off – since walking out when Amy was four. Flicking through, she noticed that some of the photographs were square and others rectangular. Thinking this was odd (surely photos used to be a standard size?), she looked closer and saw, in one of the square ones, the fingers of a child's severed hand – her own – clasped inside Dad's. Patti had neatly, surgically, sliced her off at the wrist.

Gasping, Amy shut the album and pushed it away. Being excised with such care and precision was worse than having your face scratched out in anger. It was the deliberateness of it that was so disturbing. It's all right, she told herself, desperately. It's only what you were expecting.

She'd spent so many years trying not to mind, not to

acknowledge how much it hurt, masking the feelings with everything she could, but now, alone, and with a pain in her chest that felt almost like a wound, she started to cry. How long, she wondered, would Patti be able to make her feel like that? For the rest of her life?

She knew – Patti had told her when she was fifteen – that her mother hadn't wanted a child, and had only gone through with the pregnancy because George had insisted. Then – Patti hadn't said this, but by that time Amy understood it though she couldn't have put it into words – her mother had turned her into a means of controlling him.

Amy pulled the second album towards her, and opened it. It was less a record of childhood than a case-study. Mum's version of the truth. The sequence of photographs gave a more distorted image than most, but then, Amy thought dully, who takes pictures of the row over dinner and the slapped toddler, or videos a funeral? The things we want to record are christenings, weddings, holidays and parties – the favourable reflections of family life. The photos in this album were intended to serve an entirely different purpose. They weren't a record of her growing up, they were a means to an end.

Patti had posed Amy carefully and posted the resulting images of a sickly creature, not long for this world, to her husband, hoping to blackmail him into coming home. Wiping her eyes, Amy turned the pages. From being a sturdy, grinning toddler, she saw herself mutate into a pale seven-year-old, propped up by pillows and smiling bravely but queasily (she'd been violently sick five minutes later); a stick-limbed nine-year-old, sprawled on a rug in the garden, a plastic hospital bracelet still round her wrist; and finally, at fourteen, a gowned, prone figure on a trolley in a hospital corridor. Amy couldn't remember that one being taken – perhaps she hadn't come round from the anaesthetic. She looked as if she were dead.

Exploratory surgery. It was always that. She rubbed her chest and stomach. The scars were still there – vertical and horizontal, neat and faint except for one botched job, where the skin had puckered around the incision.

There was no one else in the pictures. Even the baby ones

didn't show either of her parents holding her. There must have been at least one, Amy thought, but Patti obviously hadn't thought it worth keeping. Only Amy was left, sick and alone. But I did have friends, she told herself. She remembered them: Sandra Bailey and Katie Palmer from primary school, and then Jacqui Newstead, Lucy Davis, Susan Cooper . . . But there was no evidence of them here. And all the normal kid stuff like running and jumping and mucking about in sandpits and riding camels at the zoo, that wasn't here, either. Yet she'd done it, hadn't she? She remembered doing it – or bits of it – with a reasonable degree of clarity, or thought she did. But the invalid in the photographs made her think that she was wrong and Patti was right. That child couldn't have done any of those things: she was a wreck, and if her Dad didn't come home very, very soon, she'd die and then he'd never see his little girl again.

Don't let her get to you, Amy told herself. That's why she's done this. She. Is. Not. Going. To. Win. She closed the album, blew her nose, then picked up the brown paper parcel and felt it. Something solid and rectangular, like a book. Unwrapping it, she saw that it was an old-fashioned five-year diary, bound in shiny pink leather, with a strap and a lock. She looked into the paper bag – no keys. Amy tugged at the strap, but the book remained firmly shut. Odd, she thought, if it was her mother's – it didn't look like the sort of diary Patti would have, but then Amy hadn't known she'd kept one. She put it on her lap and stared at it for a long time. Did she really want to know what was in it?

Levering herself off the floor, she went through to the kitchen and pulled the scissors out of the cutlery drawer. Weighing them in her hand, she thought, No. She didn't want to deface it, and in any case, she wanted to keep the lock – to shut Patti inside, if necessary. She fished in her handbag for the tweezers that she kept with her make-up. Back in the sitting room, she set to work picking the lock. After a few minutes of careful poking and twiddling, it yielded. Amy took a deep breath, opened the diary to its fullest extent, and shook it. A black-and-white photograph fluttered to the floor.