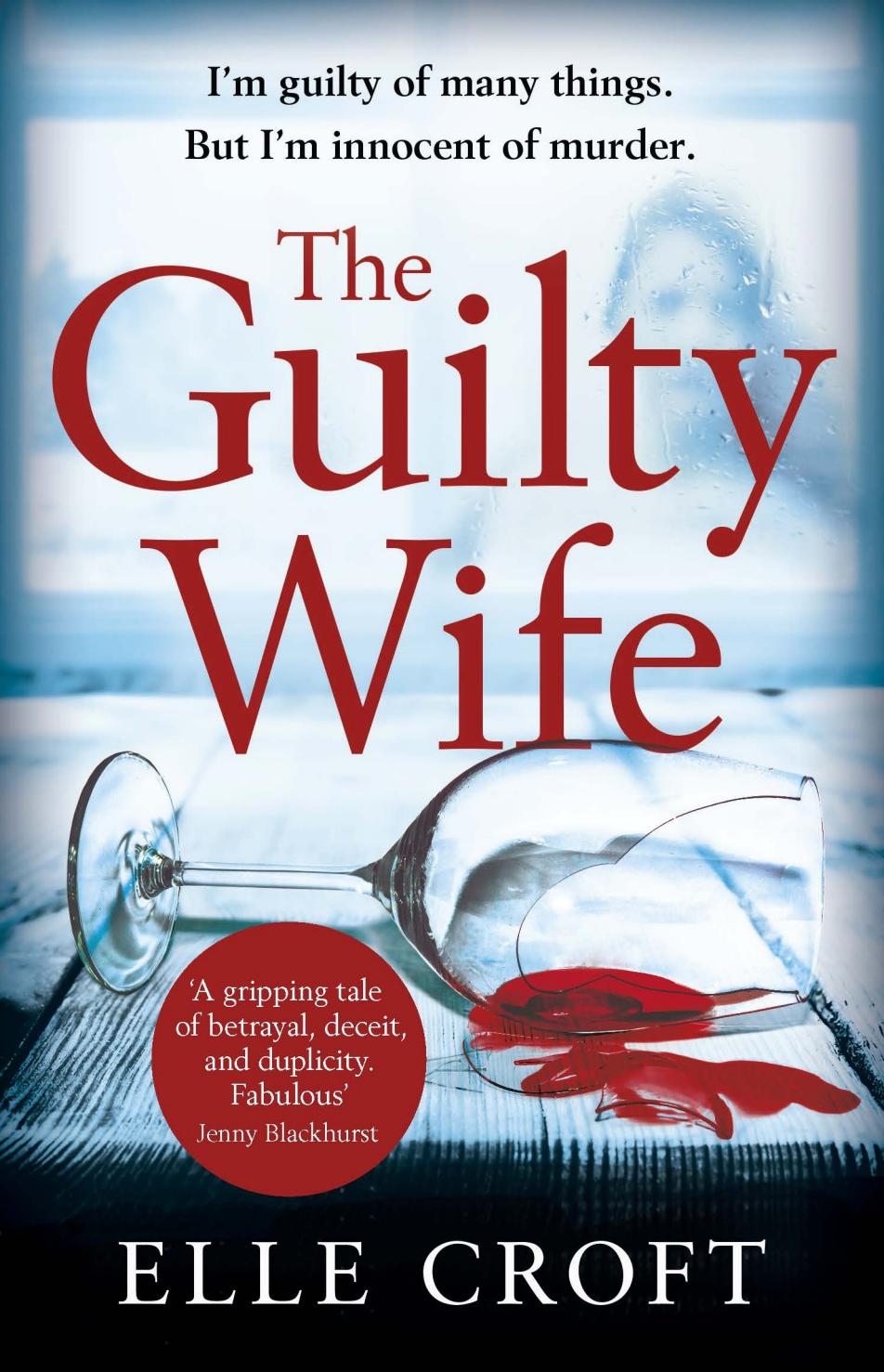
I'm guilty of many things.
But I'm innocent of murder.

The Guilty Wife



'A gripping tale of betrayal, deceit, and duplicity. Fabulous'
Jenny Blackhurst

ELLE CROFT

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Prologue

A helicopter pilot.

If you'd asked me what I was going to be when I grew up, back when I was a round-faced teenager, that would have been my answer. No hesitation. I knew I was born to fly, right up until the first time I boarded a plane and my family holiday was cut short by an unexpectedly crippling panic attack. I've never managed to shake that terror, and I haven't boarded an aircraft since.

But that fear, the lung-crushing, paralysing dread I experienced so long ago in my cramped window seat was nothing compared to this.

What I feel now is beyond panic.

Because . . . someone knows.

My secrets are in their hands. Hands that were, just days ago, soaked in the blood of a man it should have been impossible to harm. Hands that could tear me apart just as effortlessly.

I suspect that they're enjoying this too much to kill me, though. For now, at least. They'll toy with me first, destroy everything I have.

Ruin me.

But before my dirty laundry is thrown out in a heap to be picked through and scrutinised, I feel like I should open the windows and let some fresh air diffuse a bit of truth into my situation.

I am not guilty.

But even I can admit that doesn't make me innocent.

Chapter One

'This is how Monday evenings should always look,' Calum announced, reminding me how different the world appeared to someone with no financial limitations.

I smiled and rolled my eyes, but couldn't help agreeing with him.

I was wrapped in my thickest scarf, the lingering warmth of the day not quite defending itself against the chill that cut through the evening air. We'd spent the last moments of sunshine basking on Calum's terrace and drinking in the view of London that spread out before us. When I turned my head I could see the top of Big Ben, his famous face peeking out across the tree line, surveying his city as it came alive in the unseasonal warmth. I'd suggested a walk, but Calum had shaken his head. No public outings; one of his many precautions. Instead, he had grabbed me by the hips and lifted me high, a figure-skater move that had elicited a squeal of surprise, and when he'd thrown me on his bed all thoughts of a walk had been swiftly forgotten.

Now he was running his thumb lightly across the back of my hand, watching with amusement as two sparrows bravely took it in turns to hop closer and closer to our table, daring one another to steal stray crumbs.

I smiled contentedly as I took in Calum's tousled hair and his shadow of dark stubble. He had the air of a man without

a care or responsibility, not someone with an enormous company and a public persona to maintain. His forehead was for once uncreased by the frown that usually darkened his face and made his staff worry constantly that he was angry.

Noticing my gaze, he turned towards me, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards. Suddenly shy, I couldn't stop the warmth that began creeping into my cheeks. I felt silly for reacting that way, but however much I promised myself I'd stay cool in his presence, there was nothing I could do to stop it.

'You're so cute when you blush,' he said, and the heat spread to my chest.

'Stop it,' I pleaded. 'You know that just makes it worse.'

He laughed, and pulled me onto his lap.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered in my ear.

'Well, that doesn't stop you from teasing me every time it happens.'

'I can't help it. You make it too easy.'

'I wish you had some kind of flaw I could tease you about.'

'It's not a flaw,' he said, kissing my cheek. 'I think you look beautiful, even when you're embarrassed. And trust me, I'm far from perfect. You just don't see it yet.'

I laughed and leaned back, allowing myself to be lulled by the slow rise and fall of his chest. He ran his hand lightly up and down my back in a gentle rhythm as we stared at the park being drenched in the golden hue of a dying day.

'Oh,' I said suddenly. 'I almost forgot.'

'What's that?'

'Your present.'

'Ah,' he replied, raising an eyebrow.

I rummaged for a few seconds in my bag before handing Calum a tiny silver box tied with a blue ribbon.

'Happy birthday,' I said, kissing him lightly. 'I'm sorry it's so late, but . . . well, I haven't really seen you—'

'I totally understand,' he interrupted. 'Besides, I love an extended birthday.'

I watched him struggling with the knot I'd spent so long perfecting that afternoon, and mirrored his own mischievous smile when he lifted the lid.

He pulled the small black piece of plastic from its bed of tissue paper and leaned over to kiss me.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I love it.'

'Well, you haven't even seen what's on it yet,' I joked. 'It might just be a memory card full of puppy pictures.'

'I do love puppies. But probably not as much as I think I'll love what's on here.'

He kissed me again, but after a few seconds I pulled away.

'Calum,' I said, serious now, 'I know we've already spoken about it, but you really have to make sure no one sees these. Please promise me.'

'Bethany,' he said, his tone gentle. 'I would never show anyone, but are you sure you're comfortable with this? I know it was my idea, and I also know it's not the sort of thing you'd usually do – or the sort of thing I'd do, for that matter. So if you want me to get rid of it, we can just forget about the photos.'

The photos are the only gift I could possibly afford, I thought. What do you get the man who, quite literally, has everything? A steamy photo shoot featuring the two of you, apparently.

I studied his face, trying to decide if he meant it, if he really would destroy the memory card just because I was uncomfortable. But it was so difficult to make rational

decisions when his eyes were fixed on me. That gaze was completely disarming.

'No, of course I don't want you to get rid of it,' I said eventually, meaning it. 'It's just not something I've ever done before. And anyway, I'm more confident being behind the lens, not in front of it.'

'Well, I thought you made an excellent model. Have you considered a career change?'

'I have, but I like burgers far too much.'

'You could have fooled me. With a figure like that, I'd have thought you lived off lettuce.'

Calum got up and reached for my hand.

'Come on.'

I laced my fingers through his and stood, following his lead towards the door. We walked in silence into his apartment, past the bed where the illicit photos had been taken and across the room to his desk, almost hidden in the furthest corner. He reached for a book on the second shelf and opened a drawer, which he rummaged through for a few seconds. He handed the book to me and I stared at him, waiting for an explanation. Not receiving one, I turned it over, then flipped through the pages. Nothing.

'A business self-help book?' I asked. 'Am I missing something here?'

He smiled, taking the book from me, and flicking to the back cover.

'Can you give me a piece of that please?' he asked, passing me a roll of tape.

I complied, frowning in confusion.

He stuck the memory card to the rectangle of tape I'd given him and secured it to the inside of the book's cover. Replacing it on the shelf with the rest of his serious

non-fiction, he turned back to kiss me again. This time I kissed him back.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'No one but us will know it's there.'

'Thank you,' I whispered.

'You're welcome. And trust me. No one wants to keep our secret more than I do. Those photos are safe with me.'

Chapter Two

My husband reached for my hand as we stepped out of the Tube station and were greeted by the buzz of after-work revellers. Bars and pubs crawled with drinkers who had spilled onto the streets and lined the narrow pavements. There was a tangible excitement in the air, a ripple of electricity caused by the spurt of warm weather that had brought Londoners out in droves, despite it being a Tuesday night.

I felt a pull to join in the springtime festivities, to soak up the warmth of the evening, but instead, I took his hand and wrenched the heavy wooden door open. We blinked away the sunlight as our eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the restaurant.

I tried to stay focused on the conversations that unfolded during our meal, but I was relieved when we waved our friends goodnight and their cab turned the corner to disappear from sight.

Jason curled his arm around my waist and I leaned into him, glad that it was just the two of us again. He kissed the top of my head.

'Home?'

'Home,' I said, smiling up at him.

This probably comes as a surprise, given what I'd been up to the previous afternoon, but Jason and I were, by all accounts, happily married.

I was in love with my husband. Always had been, really.

Ever since the morning after I met him, in our first week of university. We'd been introduced at a party, the kind where there was lots of drinking, and lots of dancing. I'd foolishly worn a pair of brand-new heels, and by the end of the evening I was hobbling ungracefully on bleeding feet. The next morning when I dragged myself out of bed to take a shower, I tripped on a small blue box that was sitting in the hallway outside my door. Inside was a packet of blister plasters and a can of Coke, along with a note that said:

For your hangover. And your heels. I hope to see you again soon. J

We were official within days. He was my first serious boyfriend, and the only man I'd ever loved.

Until now.

Somehow, without meaning to, I'd found myself having an affair. An act of betrayal that I never imagined myself capable of. And to make matters even worse, the affair wasn't just about the sex. I really cared for Calum.

I hadn't fallen out of love with Jason. How could I? He was everything I could ask for in a husband. Supportive, handsome, loyal.

The opposite of me. I was a liar. A cheat. An adulterer.

And in love with two men at the same time.