ELIZABETH KAY

Only you know the ~~truth~~

SEVEN LIES

READ THE FIRST LIE

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THE FIRST LIE

Chapter One

'And that's how I won her heart,' he said, smiling. He leant back in his chair, lifting his hands behind his head, expanding his chest. He was always so smug.

He looked at me, and then at the idiot sitting beside me, and then turned back again to me. He was waiting for us to respond. He wanted to see the smiles stretch across our faces, to feel our admiration, our awe.

I hated him. I hated him in an all-encompassing, burning, biblical way. I hated that he repeated this story every time I came to dinner, every Friday evening. It didn't matter who I brought with me. It didn't matter which degenerate I was dating at the time.

He always told them this story.

Because this story, you see, was his ultimate trophy. For a man like Charles – successful, wealthy, charming – a beautiful, bright, sparkling woman like Marnie was the final medal in his collection. And because he was fuelled by the respect and admiration of others, and perhaps

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because he received neither from me, he wrenched them instead from his other guests.

What I wanted to say in response, and what I never said, is that Marnie's heart was never his to win. A heart, if we're being honest, which I finally am, can never be won. It can only be given, only received. You cannot persuade, entice, change, still, steal, steel, take a heart. And you certainly cannot win a heart.

'Cream?' Marnie asked.

She was standing beside the dining table holding a white ceramic jug. Her hair was pinned neatly at the top of her neck, loose curls around her cheeks. Her necklace was twisted, the clasp beside the pendant, hanging together against her breastbone.

I shook my head. 'No, thanks,' I said.

'Not you,' she replied, and she smiled. 'I know not you.'

I want to tell you something now, before we begin. Marnie Gregory is the most impressive, inspiring, astonishing woman I know. She has been my best friend for over eighteen years – our relationship is legally an adult; able to drink, marry, gamble – ever since we met at secondary school.

It was our first day and we were queuing in a long, thin corridor, a line of eleven-year-olds worming their way towards a table at the other end of the hall. There were groups huddled at intervals, like mice in a snake, bulging from the orderly, single-file line.

I was anxious, aware that I knew no one, psychologically preparing

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myself for being lonely and alone for the best part of a decade. I stared at those groups and tried to convince myself that I didn't want to be part of one anyway.

I stepped forwards too fast, too far, and stood on the heel of the girl in front. She spun around. My instinct was panic; I was sure that I was about to be humiliated, shouted at, belittled in front of my peers. But that fear dissipated the moment I saw her. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but Marnie Gregory is like the sun. I thought it then; I often think it now. Her skin is shockingly fair, a porcelain cream tempered only occasionally – after exercise, for example, or when she is overwhelmingly content – by rosy cheeks. Her hair is a deep auburn, twisted into spirals of red and gold, and her eyes are a pale, near-white blue.

'Sorry,' I said, stepping backwards and looking down at my shiny new shoes.

'My name's Marnie,' she said. 'What's yours?'

That first encounter is symbolic of our entire relationship, all eighteen years of it. Marnie has an openness, a tone that invites warmth and love. She is unassumingly confident, unafraid and unaware of any presumptions you might bring to the conversation. Whereas I am intensely aware. I am afraid of any potential animosity and am always waiting for what I know will come eventually. I am always waiting to be ridiculed. Then, I feared judgement for the pimples across my forehead, my mousy hair, my too-big uniform. Now, my tone of voice, the way it shakes, my clothing, comfortable and rarely flattering, my hair, my trainers, my chewed fingernails.

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She is light where I am dark.

I knew it then. Now you'll know it too.

'Name?' barked the blue-bloused teacher standing behind a desk at the front of the line.

'Marnie Gregory,' she said, so firm and self-assured.

'E . . . F . . . G . . . Gregory. Margene. You're in that classroom there, the one with the C on the door. And you,' she continued. 'Who are you?'

"B," I said. 'For Baxter. Jane Baxter.'

She consulted her list. 'With her. Over there. Door with the C.'

Some might argue that it was a friendship of convenience and that I would have accepted any offer of kindness, of affection, of love. And maybe that's true. In which case, I might counter that we were destined to be together, that our friendship was inked in the stars, because further down our path she'd need me too.

That sounds like nonsense, I know. It probably is. But sometimes I could swear to it.

'Yes, please,' said Stanley. 'I'll have some cream.'

Stanley was two years my junior and a lawyer with a number of degrees. He had white-blond hair that flopped over his eyes and he grinned constantly, often for no discernible reason. He could speak to women, unlike most of his peers: the result, I guess, of spending his childhood surrounded by sisters. But he was fundamentally dull. Unsurprisingly, Charles seemed to be enjoying his company. Which made me dislike Stanley even more.

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Marnie passed the jug across the table, pressing her blouse to her stomach. She didn't want the fabric – silk, I think – to skate the top of the fruit bowl.

'Anything else?' she asked, looking at Stanley, and then at me, and then to Charles. He was wearing a blue and white striped shirt and he'd undone the top buttons so that a triangle of dark hairs sprouted from between the fringes of the fabric. Her eyes hovered there for a moment. He shook his head in response to the question and his tie – undone and loose around his neck – slipped further to the left.

'Perfect,' she said, sitting down and picking up her dessert spoon.

The conversation was – as always – dominated by Charles. Stanley could keep up, interjecting successes of his own wherever possible, but I was bored and I think that Marnie was too. We were both leaning back into our chairs, sipping on the last of our glasses of wine, absorbed instead in the imagined conversations playing out within our own minds.

At half-past-ten, Marnie stood, as she always did at half-past-ten, and said, 'Right.'

'Right,' I repeated. I stood too.

She lifted our four bowls from the table and stacked them in the curve of her left arm. A small bead of pink juice from a raspberry still sitting in one of the dishes bled into the white of her shirt. I picked up the now-empty fruit bowl – she'd made it herself at a pottery class a few years earlier – and the jug of cream, and followed her into the kitchen at the back of the flat.

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This flat – their flat – was testament to their relationship. Charles paid for it, as Charles paid for most things, but at Marnie's insistence. It was perhaps the only time in their three-year history that Charles had done something entirely out of character; it was not in his nature to be persuaded. And yet persuasive has always come very naturally to Marnie.

When they moved in it was little more than a hovel; small, dark, filthy, damp, spread over two floors and desperately unloved. But Marnie has always been a visionary; she sees things where others cannot. She finds hope in the darkest of places – laughably, in me – and trusts herself to deliver something great. I have always envied that self-confidence. It comes, for Marnie, from a place of stubbornness. She has no fear of failure, not because she has never failed, but because failure has only ever been a detour, a small diversion, on a journey that has ultimately led to success.

She worked tirelessly – evenings, weekends, using all of her annual leave – to build something beautiful. With her small hands, she tore wallpaper, sanded doors, painted cupboards, smoothed carpet, laid floorboards, sewed blinds: everything. Until these rooms emitted the same warmth that she does; a quiet confidence, a recognisable yet indefinable sense of home.

Marnie loaded the bowls into the dishwasher, leaving a space between each.

'They clean better this way,' she said.

'I know,' I replied, because she said the same thing every week,

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because I made the same noise – a tiny grunt – every week, because it seemed such a waste of space and water to me.

'Things are going well with Charles,' she said.

A whip snapped up my spine, pulling me straight and forcing air into my lungs.

We had only talked about their relationship once before then and it had been a conversation fraught with the long, twisted history of a very old friendship. Ever since, we had spoken only in very practical terms: their plans for the weekend; the house they might someday buy far beyond the outer limits of London; his mother riddled with cancer, living in Scotland and dying a very slow, painful, lonely death.

We had not, for example, discussed the fact that they had been together for three years and that several months earlier I had found unexpectedly – and I suppose I shouldn't have been looking – a diamond engagement ring hidden in the depths of Charles's bedside table. Nor had we discussed the fact that, even without that ring, they were hurtling towards a permanent commitment that would bind them eternally, in a way that – even after almost twenty years – Marnie and I had never been bound.

We had not discussed the fact that I hated him.

'Yes,' I replied, because I was afraid that a full sentence, perhaps even a two-syllable word, would send our friendship hurtling once again into that unforgettable mess.

'Don't you think?' she said. 'Don't you think that things are looking good for us?'

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I nodded and poured the remaining cream from the jug back into its plastic supermarket container.

'You think we're right for each other, don't you?' she asked.

I opened the fridge door and hid behind it, slowly – very slowly – returning the cream to the top shelf.

'Jane?' she asked.

'Yes,' I replied. 'I do.'

That was the first lie I told Marnie.

I wonder now – most days, in fact – if I hadn't told that first lie, if I would have told the others. I like to tell myself that the first lie was the least significant of them all. But that, ironically, is a lie. If I had been honest that Friday evening, everything might have been – would have been – different.

I want you to know this now. I thought I was doing the right thing. Old friendships are like knotted rope, worn in some parts and thick and bulbous in others. I feared that this thread of our love was too thin, too frayed, to bear the weight of my truth. Because surely the truth – that I had never hated anyone the way hated him – would have destroyed our friendship.

If I had been honest – if I had sacrificed our love for theirs – then Charles would almost certainly still be alive.

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If the lies are dangerous, the truth can be catastrophic.

Jane and Marnie have been inseparable since they were eleven years old. In their twenties they both married handsome young men. Years later both men are dead. And it all started with one little lie . . .

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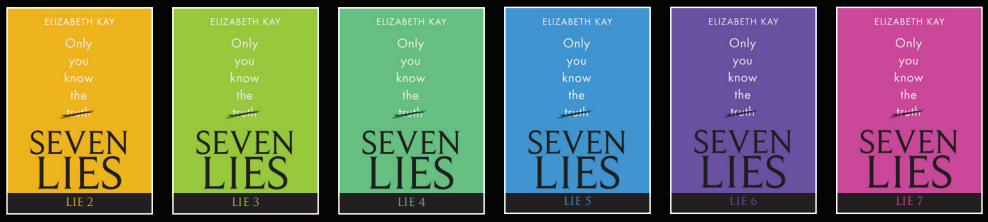

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