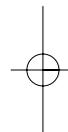
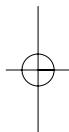




Where the Truth Lies



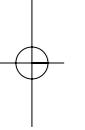
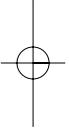


About the author

Julie Corbin was born and raised in Scotland. She is happily married to Bruce, and they now live in Sussex with their three sons. *WHERE THE TRUTH LIES* is her second novel.

Also by Julie Corbin

TELL ME NO SECRETS



JULIE CORBIN

Where the Truth Lies

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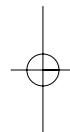
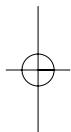
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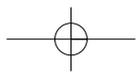
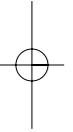
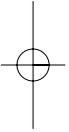
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For my sister Caroline, with love and admiration. xx





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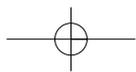
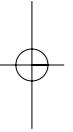
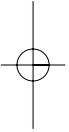
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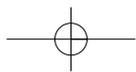
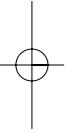
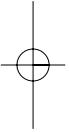
Prologue

I didn't see it coming.

No black cats crossed my path. No clear-eyed crows cawed alarm from the trees. There was nothing to warn me about what was up ahead.

An invisible clock was ticking, each beat drawing my family closer to danger and I was oblivious. Busy with the normal, everyday things that make up a life, I didn't know about the threats or the blackmail, or about the brutal turn our lives were about to take. I didn't know that someone close to me was on course to devastate my family. I thought my home was a safe place, that danger kept its distance.

I thought wrong.



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It's the first of June, Bea's fourth birthday. The party's over and the other mums have arrived to collect their children. I move between the kitchen and the back garden, handing juice to children, tea or coffee to mums, catching snippets of conversations and adding a sentence or two myself before going back inside. My stepmother, Wendy, is tidying up the remnants of wrapping and streamers that lie across the kitchen floor, squashing them into the recycling bin. I start to clear the table: plates of half-eaten sausage rolls and sandwiches; over a dozen pudding bowls, most of them scraped clean of chocolate ice cream and tangerine jelly.

'I can't believe she's four already,' Wendy says, as she arranges Bea's cards in front of the plates on the Welsh dresser. 'It seems like only yesterday she was learning to walk.'

'I know.' I look through the big picture window to where Bea and another child are hanging on to my husband, Julian, one on each arm. He's twirling them round. I lean my head against the window frame and smile, then laugh out loud as they drag him to the ground and start to pummel him with their small but persistent fists. They stop when he pretends to cry. Bea crouches beside him, trying to soothe, patting his hair until he jumps up and chases her and she screams with a kind of terrified ecstasy. When he catches her, he throws her up in the air and tickles her until her face is almost puce.

'It's such a pity Lisa can't be here,' Wendy continues, coming to stand beside me. 'Her scan results will be out tomorrow, won't they?'

I nod.

‘Oh, Claire, I do hope it’s good news.’ She gives a small sigh. ‘It would be lovely to see her well again.’

My heart squeezes. The last round of chemotherapy has left Lisa weak, emptied out, drained of almost everything that makes her my sister, and we’re all praying it’s been worth it.

‘When I visit her tomorrow, I’ll show her the party photos,’ I say, putting my arm round Wendy’s shoulder. ‘And I’ll take her some of the lovely birthday cake you made.’

‘Give her a hug from me,’ Wendy says, moving to one side as my friend Jem comes in from the garden, her arms loaded with a couple of discarded sweaters, a miniature cricket set and two Frisbees.

‘Julian’s going beyond the call of duty out there,’ she says, dumping all the stuff on the table. ‘They’re running him ragged.’

‘He’s enjoying it,’ I say, looking at my watch. ‘He has to leave for Sofia in an hour. He can nap on the plane.’

‘What’s he going there for, then?’ Jem asks.

‘It’s the case he’s working on. He needs to double-check some details with the Bulgarian police.’

‘He’s prosecuting Pavel Georgiev,’ Wendy says. ‘You’ll have heard of him, Jem. There’s been a lot about him in the papers.’

‘Yeah, I have.’ Jem looks from Wendy to me. ‘I didn’t realise he was working on *that* case.’

‘It’s really very serious,’ Wendy says, her voice hushed. ‘Georgiev and the men who work for him . . .’ She shakes her head at both of us. ‘Shocking stuff. It’s hard to believe that people can be so evil.’

‘And that’s not the half of it,’ I say. ‘There’s a lot the press can’t print because it could prejudice the trial.’ I think of some of the things Julian has told me, details I’ve avoided discussing with friends and family: young girls trafficked and used for sex, men tortured and then killed because they refused to hand over a percentage of their earnings. I shiver. ‘I’ll be glad when the trial’s over and he’s locked up for good.’

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Jem gives me a quick hug. 'You'll want some family time before Julian leaves.' She tilts her head in the direction of the garden. 'I'll get the ball rolling on the goodbyes.'

As good as her word, one mother and child after another come inside. A dozen children's voices fill the hallway. Shoes and sweaters are found, goodbyes are said, and Bea hands each of her friends a party bag. She takes this very seriously, peering into each bag before handing it over. 'That one's for you, Adam,' she says. 'It has the red water pistol.' She looks up at me. 'He likes water pistols.'

'OK, sweetheart.' I stroke my hand across her forehead, bringing wispy blonde hair away from her eyes and tucking it back under her Alice band. She's wearing a white party dress with a turquoise ribbon round the bodice. It exactly matches the colour of her eyes, still turned up towards mine.

'I'm four.' She touches the badges pinned to her chest, each one shouting out the same number.

'You are.' I kiss her pink cheeks. 'But you'll always be my baby.'

'I'm not a baby, Mummy!' She stares at me earnestly. 'I'm four now.'

'Well, still, you'll always be my precious baby girl.' I tickle her middle. 'That's just the way it is.'

The corners of her mouth twitch in a smile and then she hands out the next party bag. It's been a long day and I expected her to be over-wound by now, but she's taking all the attention in her stride. It makes me feel very proud of her and I can't help but give her another hug.

The front door opens and closes countless times, the late-afternoon sunshine warming the black-and-white chequered floor tiles in the porch. Almost everyone is gone when I leave Bea at the door with Wendy and find one of the mums a spare T-shirt for her daughter, Jessica, who has spilled juice down the front of hers. We talk in Bea's room for a few minutes, about nursery and about the ubiquitous road works that have sprung up at the end of the crescent, and by the time we get back downstairs, Bea has

left her post and the last remaining party bag is lying on the floor. Thinking nothing of it, I give the bag to Jessica and say goodbye to them both with a promise to arrange a play date soon.

I walk back along the hallway to the kitchen and find Julian taking a glass from the shelf.

'That went well.' I cuddle into his back. 'Thank you for being chief entertainer. When the clown didn't turn up, I thought we were going to be in for trouble.'

He holds the glass under the running cold tap until it's full to the brim. 'Couldn't have done it without Charlie.'

'You're right. It's great having him home.' I look outside into the garden but can't see our elder son, Charlie, or his girlfriend, Amy. Wendy is the only one there, righting chairs and picking stray sweet papers off the grass. 'Being away at university has helped him grow up.'

'It has.' He swallows down the water, wipes the back of his hand across his mouth and then stretches out his spine. 'I'm getting too old for children's parties.'

'Fifty is the new forty, you know.'

'Tell that to my knees.' He collapses down on to a chair and eases off his shoes.

'There's grass all over you.' I brush it off his upper back, then let my hands slide round his neck and rest my elbows on his shoulders. I put my mouth next to his ear. 'Do you really have to go to Sofia today?'

'I do.' He pulls me round on to his lap. 'I have a meeting early tomorrow.'

'It's been so nice having you home on a weekday.' I rest my head close to his neck. 'I hope the trial's over before the summer ends. We could go to Dorset, take Lisa with us and have a family holiday, all of us together.'

I feel his body tense ever so slightly.

'We're not going to get a holiday?' I say.

He doesn't answer me. I sit back so that I can see his expression.

Almost twenty-five years of looking at his face and I've yet to grow tired of it. He has good bone structure: high cheekbones and a straight nose. His mouth is wide and made for smiling. His eyes are the colour of rich mahogany; his hair is jet black and curly with a smattering of grey at his temples. Not for the first time I think that he's far too handsome to be a barrister. But today the way he's looking at me, staring in fact, is puzzling.

'Are you OK?' I say.

The phone rings, high-pitched and intrusive. I reach behind Julian and take it from its cradle on the dresser.

'Hi, Mum. It's me.'

'Jack!' I automatically smile at the sound of my younger son's voice. 'Bea's had a great party. She loved the present you sent. How's the revision going?' Jack is at boarding school and in the throes of his GCSEs. 'You prepared for the last couple?'

'Getting there.'

In the background, I hear a voice shouting his name.

'I just called to wish Bea a happy birthday,' he says.

'OK. I'll pass you over to Dad while I find her.' Julian takes the phone from me and I go to the bottom of the stairs. 'Bea!' I call. 'Jack's on the phone.'

No answer. There's no way she'd want to miss out on a call from him. Although separated in age from Jack and Charlie by twelve and fifteen years, Bea loves both her brothers with a blind, full-on passion. She must be listening to a story tape or else all the excitement of the day has caught up with her and she's fallen asleep somewhere.

I have a quick look in the sitting room – empty – then climb the stairs to her bedroom, calling her name as I go. I push open the door, but she isn't in there either. I check the master bedroom – it wouldn't be the first time she's decided to raid my make-up or try on my shoes. I go into our en suite bathroom. I even open my wardrobe, but there's no sign of her.

The shower is running in the family bathroom and I can hear Charlie singing quietly. Our house is on four floors and I go

quickly up to the top floor, where we have two spare rooms. I don't expect to find her here and I don't. Both rooms have an un-lived-in feel.

'Jack's on the phone!' I call, going down the stairs again. 'Bea, if you're hiding, you have to come out now.'

I go all the way down to the basement level, where there's the utility room, Julian's study and Jack's bedroom. There's nobody here. The utility room leads straight out on to the garden at the back and I shout to Wendy, 'Bea's not out there with you, is she?'

'No. I last saw her in the sitting room.'

I climb the stairs again and am almost back in the kitchen when I remember. 'Wait!' I'm speaking to myself. I raise both my palms in the air in front of me, then turn back along the hallway, my sandals drumming a hectic beat on the tiles. Bea has a den under the stairs. She keeps her soft toys and a pile of cushions carefully arranged for optimum comfort. She can often be found there, playing with her animals or simply lying with her thumb in her mouth and a faraway look in her eyes. I pull aside the curtain that conceals the space. She isn't there. I take a deep breath, feel it catch in my throat. With all the comings and goings today she could easily have slipped out through the front door. Perhaps she followed one of her friends. But why would she do that? It's more likely that she's playing somewhere in the house, somewhere I haven't thought of.

I go back to the kitchen. 'I can't find her,' I say, fully expecting Julian to smile and remind me of some obvious place that I've forgotten to look.

He doesn't. His eyes hold mine for a split second and then he's out of his seat so quickly that I lurch back against the work surface. He slides his feet into his shoes and speaks curtly into the phone. 'Jack, we'll call you back.' He puts the handset on the table and looks at me. 'What do you mean you can't find her?'

'I've called her, but she isn't answering. I think I've looked everywhere.'

'She couldn't have gone off with one of the mothers?'

‘No, of course not.’ I shake my head. ‘Nobody would take her without asking.’ I look around helplessly. ‘She must be in the house somewhere.’

He moves past me and goes to the stairs. ‘Bea!’ He calls her name several times, both up and down the stairwell, his voice so loud it’s almost a roar.

‘Julian!’ The volume of sound is making me jump. ‘That will frighten her.’

He ignores me and, taking the stairs two at a time, goes up to the first floor. ‘Charlie!’ He bangs on the bathroom door.

Charlie, looking bewildered, comes out into the landing, a towel round his waist and another in his right hand which he’s using to rub his hair. ‘What?’

‘Have you seen Bea?’

‘Amy’s taken her to the park. Didn’t she tell you?’

‘No.’

‘There we are, then.’ I allow my shoulders to relax down from my ears. ‘Whew! Panic over.’

But Julian isn’t reassured. He goes into our bedroom, looking through the front window. We live in a terrace of white townhouses in a crescent in Brighton. The road curves round a grassy play area with three swings, a slide and a chunky wooden climbing frame. I follow Julian’s eyes and see at once that Bea isn’t there. The park is empty apart from Jem, who’s pushing her son, Adam, on the swing. Without looking at me, Julian goes down the stairs again. I follow him.

‘Julian?’

He’s not listening. He’s out the front door and crossing the road. He shouts to Jem, ‘Have you seen Bea?’

She shakes her head and Julian starts to pace in front of the iron railings. I try to catch his arm, but he doesn’t even register I’m there. His expression is strained, his pallor strangely grey considering the speed of his breathing and the heat of the afternoon sun. But worst of all is the frantic look in his eyes, as his gaze trawls from one end of the street to the other. I reach for

his arm again, but still he isn't seeing me, his attention gripped by whatever has sparked his panic. This behaviour is so shocking, so un-Julian-like that I'm stunned. It's as if I've woken up in a parallel world where the sky is down and the ground is up. My head fills with a heavy, stifling blackness and then a succession of flashing lights blind me. I hold on to the railing next to me and try to breathe. Blood booms against my eardrums with a forced, almost manic intensity. And behind all of this, I have only one coherent thought – for some inexplicable reason, Julian thinks Bea is in danger.

As soon as my vision clears, I grab on to his shirt. 'Julian!' I jerk him towards me. 'What's going on?'

His eyes when they finally look into mine are flooded with apprehension and I flinch, draw back. 'What's the matter with you?' I say. 'Why are you reacting like this?'

'Where are they?' His eyes scan the street again.

'I don't know, but surely . . .' I take a deep breath. 'Surely you don't think Amy's going to harm Bea?'

'I don't know, Claire.' His lips, his face, his whole body is held still, tight with tension. 'But think about it. What do we actually know about this girl?'

'Well . . .' I pause. 'She's studying biological sciences. Charlie's been going out with her for about nine months. Her parents used to live in Manchester but now they live in Cyprus. She is—'

'Mostly unknown to us,' Julian says. Then he holds my shoulders and shakes me, not roughly, but enough to make my aching head feel an increase in pressure. 'Where else could she have taken her?'

'The corner shop. But—' He's gone before I can finish the sentence. 'Bea normally only goes there with one of the boys,' I say quietly to myself. The truth is that Bea isn't particularly fond of Amy and has told me several times that she likes it better when Charlie comes home on his own. I can't say that I've warmed to Amy either, but not because she monopolises Charlie, more because of her manner. She is abrasive, direct to the point of

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being rude. Charlie told me this is one of the reasons he's attracted to her – she tells it like it is, unlike most of the girls his age, who say one thing and mean another.

I put my hands to my cheeks, close my eyes and allow myself to visualise Bea's face. If she were in danger, I would know. How could I not? She is my child. I spend most of every day with her and often the night too, when she climbs into our bed. Though no longer joined by a physical umbilical cord, there is an invisible rope that's just as strong, just as vital, that binds us together. I have a sixth sense for her well-being. I know her likes and dislikes. I anticipate her needs. I tell myself again, if she were in danger, I would know. Whatever is going on here, I think it has more to do with Julian's state of mind than it does with Amy's.

I open my eyes and search the pavement for signs of Amy and Bea but see only a couple of people walking purposefully in the direction of the main road.

'What's happening, Mum?' Charlie comes down the steps behind me. He's wearing shorts and flip-flops and a worried expression.

'Dad's . . . concerned,' I say, almost baulking over the understatement. 'They aren't in the park and . . .' I shrug. 'Can you think of anywhere Amy might have taken Bea?'

'I dunno.' He shakes his head. 'But she'll be OK. Why's Dad panicking like this?'

I follow Charlie's gaze to the end of the street. Julian has come out of the corner shop and is running towards us. And he's running quickly. I don't remember ever seeing him move with such urgency.

'Your dad has been tense recently . . . what with the trial and everything.' I hear my voice saying this and I believe it, because it's the only explanation that makes sense. Before a trial begins, Julian is unusually preoccupied, his mind packed full of evidence and witness statements and arguments for the prosecution. This is the most high-profile case he has ever been involved in and

it's a career-maker. He's bound to be more on edge than normal. I understand this. I was a lawyer myself; I know how pressured the job becomes. What's more, twice in the last fifteen years Julian has been involved in trying to bring Georgiev to justice and both times the case fell apart because of problems with witnesses – one mysteriously disappeared, and another retracted his statement at the eleventh hour. This time, though, the main witness is being protected by the Witness Anonymity Act and this is the best shot that Julian and his team at the Crown Prosecution Service will ever have at convicting Georgiev.

'The corner shop's empty and the girl serving hasn't seen them.' He stops in front of us, his hand reaching into his back pocket. 'I'm going to call the police.'

'Dad! What the hell?'

'Julian, shouldn't we wait a bit?' I hold on to his arm. 'She'll be fine.'

The look he gives me makes my stomach shrivel.

'I'll call Amy and find out where they are,' Charlie says.

'Good idea,' I nod.

'Quickly, then,' Julian says.

'Yeah. OK.' Charlie takes his mobile out of his pocket and presses two buttons. 'Chill.'

Seconds tick by.

'She's not answering?' Julian asks.

'Give her a chance.'

More seconds and Julian loses patience. He takes his own phone from his pocket. I watch his fingers move over the buttons.

'Look! Look!' Charlie shakes his father's arm. 'They're coming.'

He's right. Amy, Bea and Mary Percival, Bea's nursery teacher, are walking along the pavement towards us. Bea is skipping between the two women, holding on to their hands. Relief surges through me like a wave, washing me clean of the confusion of the last few minutes. I watch Julian walk towards them and swing Bea up into his arms. He says something to Amy. She gives a careless shrug and he turns away. My eyes

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meet his as he climbs the stairs. He looks as if he's been put through a wringer.

Amy is tall for a girl, around five feet nine, and has a loose-hipped walk, accentuated by the way she dresses: floaty skirts with leggings underneath and short, tight tops that force her larger than average breasts to spill out over the top. When she's within earshot, she shouts to me, 'What's with Julian?'

'He was worried. We didn't know where Bea was.'

'She asked me to take her out. She saw her teacher through the window.'

'It's my fault,' Miss Percival pipes up.

'It's OK.' I half smile at them both. 'But next time, Amy, if you could just tell me before you take her ou—'

'I did.' Her brow furrows with indignation. 'I called up the stairs. You were there with another mother.'

'I'm sorry – I didn't hear you.'

She gives another careless shrug. 'I thought you had.'

'Nothing happened, Mum,' Charlie says, his arms protectively encircling Amy's shoulders. Not that she needs it. She is, as ever, sure of her own ground. 'Dad seriously over-reacted.'

'Perhaps he did, Charlie,' I say, keeping my tone even, 'but nevertheless, next time' – I look at Amy – 'you need to make sure I've heard you before you go off with Bea.'

'There doesn't have to be a next time,' Amy says, making wide eyes at me, her head shaking from side to side. 'I was only trying to be helpful.'

I stop short of apologising again. Instead I hold my tongue very firmly between my teeth. Amy spends most of the university holidays and at least one night a week during term-time living in our home and eating our food. Not that I grudge her this. Nor do I expect any great thanks for it. But her persistent I'm-right-and-you're-wrong attitude grates on my nerves.

However, whether we like it or not, she's Charlie's girlfriend and I can already see that the incident is dividing his loyalties. He gives me an imploring look over her shoulder while drawing

her still closer into his chest. I manage a smile and he smiles back, then leads Amy up the stairs and they both return indoors. I'm left with Miss Percival.

'All's well that ends' – she sees my face and hesitates – 'well.'

'Yes.' I take a deep breath. 'I suppose that's true, but you can imagine . . . It was alarming to find that Bea had disappeared from the house.'

'I completely understand,' she says, taking my hand, then dropping it almost at once as if shocked by her own temerity. Not much more than five feet tall, her brown hair is cut short, and she has unremarkable grey-blue eyes. She comes across as someone who is more comfortable with children than adults, and is usually either shy or overly formal when talking to me. But with the children she relaxes into another part of herself and is clearly great fun. Bea absolutely adores her, and I've no doubt that when she saw her through the window, she wanted to run outside and say hello.

'Bea just loves coming to nursery,' I say. 'She's very fond of you.'

'Well . . .' She blushes. 'She's a lovely little girl. She brings so much enthusiasm to the class. That's why we were at the end of the street – she wanted to show me where the men are building the new crossing. We've been talking about road safety at circle time.'

'I see.'

'I'm sorry to have caused you concern.' She blushes again. 'It's the last thing I would want to do.'

A taxi pulls up alongside us and the driver winds down his window. 'Taxi for Julian Miller.'

'He's inside,' I say. 'I'll tell him you're here.'

Miss Percival smiles her goodbye and I go indoors. Julian is on the phone in the kitchen.

'The taxi's here,' I tell him.

He holds up a hand. I tap my watch and give him a significant look. I know that he's cutting it fine. He smiles distractedly

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and turns away from me, still talking into the phone, the fingers of his free hand drumming an impatient rhythm on the table. I can't hear what he's saying and I have no idea to whom he's talking. His suitcase, already packed, is in his study and I go downstairs to fetch it.

From here I see that Bea is in the garden with Wendy. They are looking down into the vegetable patch where spinach and rocket are growing like weeds.

'I get my water can, Grandma,' I hear Bea say, and she runs off towards the shed. She's still wearing her party dress but has swapped her sandals for her favourite *Finding Nemo* Wellington boots.

As I watch her, my heart expands with two distinct feelings: the first, a sweet relief that she's safe and happy; the second, a bitter rush of horror at the thought that she could have been missing for real and we could now be living every parent's worst nightmare.

The taxi beeps its horn from the front of the house and that sets me in motion again. I go upstairs with Julian's suitcase and leave it in the hall. Outside, I find the driver on the pavement, leaning against the side of the car. 'I'm sorry – could you wait just another minute or two? My husband's on the phone.'

He gives me a resigned look and lights up a cigarette as I return indoors.

Julian is coming along the hallway from the kitchen and I turn to meet him. 'Julian.' Suddenly I feel overwhelmed and throw my arms around him. He hugs me to him and I breathe in his smell, feel the familiar weight and tilt of his body as it leans in to mine. 'That was a bit scary, wasn't it?'

He nods. 'Claire, I—'

'I know neither of us particularly likes Amy,' I whisper, 'but—'

'I over-reacted.' He kisses me, makes it last, like he has all the time in the world. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's OK.' I rub his cheek. 'I know the trial is looming and that makes for a stressful time.'

He looks away, but not quickly enough and I see a dark shadow move across his face.

My spine straightens and I take a step back. 'What was that?' I say.

'What?'

'That look on your face.'

'What look?' He throws out his arms and smiles at me, innocence personified, but I'm not convinced.

'Julian?' I move in close again. 'Everything's all right, isn't it?'

'Listen—' His attention strays towards the front door as the driver sounds his horn again. 'I'll be back in no time.' He lifts his suitcase off the floor. 'I have my BlackBerry with me, but in case the signal is poor, I've left contact numbers on the pinboard.' He runs his hands up and then down my back. 'I love you, you know.'

'I know.' I hold his eyes for a moment, warmed by the sincerity in them, and then I let him go.

I stand on the step and watch him climb into the taxi. He waves and I do too. I watch the taxi drive away. I stay there until it turns on to the main road and disappears from sight.