



J.T.

NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR

ELLISON

HER

At the wedding  
of the year,  
a killer needs  
no invitation

DARK

A NOVEL

LIES

"Fans of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*  
will want to check out this compulsively readable tale."  
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

# **Her Dark Lies**

*J.T. Ellison*





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Her Dark Lies

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## *Beginnings and Endings*

She is going to die tonight.

The white dress, long and filmy, hampers her effort to run. The hem catches on a branch; a large rend in the fabric slashes open, exposing her leg. A deep cut blooms red along her thigh, and the blood runs down her calf. Her hair has come loose from its braid, flies unbound behind her like gossamer wings.

In her panic, she barely notices the pain.

The path ahead is marked by towering cypress and laurel, verdant and lush. A gray stone waist-high wall is all that stands between her and the cliffside. It is cool inside this miniature forest; the sky is blotted out by the purple-throated wisteria that drapes across and between the trees. Someone, years ago, built an archway along the arbor. The arch's skeleton has long since rotted away and the flowers droop into the path, clinging trails and vines that brush against her head and shoulders. It should be beautiful; instead it feels oppressive, as if the vines might animate, twist and curl around her neck and strangle her to death.

She tries not to look down to the frothing water roiling against the rocks at the cliff's base. She thinks the ruins are to her right. From what she remembers, they are between the church and the artists' colony, the four cottages cowering on the hillside, empty and waiting.

A horn shrieks, and she realizes the ferry is pulling away. A crack of lightning, and she sees the silhouette of the captain in the pilothouse, looking out to the turbulent seas ahead. A gamble that he makes it before the storm is upon them.

Don't panic. Don't panic.

Where is the church?

There it is, a flash of white through the trees. The stuccoed walls loom, the bell tower hidden behind the overgrown foliage. Now the path is moving upward, the grade increasing. She feels it in her calves and hopes again she is going the right way. The Villa is on the hill, on the northwest promontory of the island. If she can reach its doors, she will be safe.

It is too quiet. There are no birds, no creatures, no buzzing or cries, just her ragged, heavy breath and the scree shuffling underfoot as she climbs. The furious roar of the water smashing its frustration against the rocks rises from her left, echoing against the cliffside.

The dogs begin to howl.

Climb. Climb. Keep going.

She must get to the Villa. There she can call for help. Lock herself inside. Maybe find a weapon.

A branch snaps and she halts, breathless.

Someone is coming.

She startles like a deer, now heedless of the noise she's making. Fighting back a whimper of fear, she breaks free of the cloistered path to see an old decrepit staircase cut into the stone. Careful, she must be cautious, there are gaps where some steps are missing, and the rest are mossy with disuse, but hurry, hurry. Get away.

She winds up the steps, clinging to the rock face, until she bursts free into a sea of scrubby pines. Two sculptures, Janus twins, flank a slate-dark path into a labyrinth of rhododendron and azalea.

This isn't right. Where is she?

A hard breeze disrupts the trees around her, and a rumble of thunder like a thousand drums rolls across her body. Lightning flashes and she sees the Villa in the distance. So far away. On the other side of the labyrinth. The other side of the hill.

She's gone the wrong way.

A droplet of water hits her arm, then her forehead. Dread bubbles through her.

She is too late. The storm is upon her.

The howls of the dogs draw closer. The wind whistles hard and sharp, buffeting her against the stone wall. She can't move, deep fear cementing her feet. Rain makes the gauzy dress cling to the curves of her body, and the blood on her thigh washes to the ground. None of it matters. She cannot escape.

When he comes, at last, sauntering through the storm, the barking beasts leaping and growling beside him, she is crying, clinging to the wall, the lightning illuminating the ruins; the ancient stones and stark, headless statues the only witness to her death.

She goes over the wall with a thunder-drowned scream, the jagged rocks below her final companions.

## *The Party*

*Nashville, Tennessee*

The last few days before a wedding are the most stressful of a bride's life.

I repeat this mantra to justify accepting a fourth glass of champagne from the slim, silent, white-gloved server. The champagne is delightful, cool and fizzy against my throat.

I am well past tipsy, and thankfully, it seems the evening is winding down. The quartet is looking decidedly tired, and the servers have been circling with the macarons for over half an hour. All I want to do at this point is sneak off to a corner to discreetly rub the bottoms of my feet; I'm wearing my five-hour heels but I'm pushing hour six and feeling it. I am smiled, chatted, and air-kissed out.

I take a second sip, then cast a glance across the crowded ballroom to my bridegroom. Jack doesn't seem stressed at all. Quite the opposite; he is as relaxed and calm as I've seen him in weeks. He is in his element, surrounded by benefactors and businessmen, people of standing and stature. His dark blond hair is mussed, his eyes a bit glassy from all the toasting. The quintessential quarterback—impossibly handsome, easy smile, thick hair, oozing sex appeal. The kind of guy who doesn't flame out after college, but goes the whole way, becomes a brand, gets endorsement deals, marries a supermodel and has two perfect kids and an architecturally interesting home.

Though Jack is not a quarterback, and I am hardly a supermodel. I am tall, and I do have an awful lot of blond hair, but that's where the resemblance ends. I'm an artist, a painter. My talent is large canvas abstracts, modern oils. And even that has been enhanced by Jack's influence.

These assets don't seem enough, and yet, William Jackson Compton has chosen to spend his life with me.

Yes, that Jackson Compton, eldest son of the illustrious computer magnate William Brice Compton III, and his brilliant wife, Ana Catalano Compton.

This party is our last obligation before hopping a flight to Italy. To have our wedding on Isle Isola, in the Comptons' private, centuries-old villa, packed with modern art and old secrets. It's belonged to the family for generations.

Personally, I would have been fine with the courthouse, but there will be nothing but the best for Jack.

At my request, the ceremony itself will be for our closest family and friends only, but because so many people wanted to celebrate with us, the powers that be—Ana, and our wedding planner, Henna Shaikh—decided a precursor event would be fitting. A reception before the wedding, complete with a tanker truck of champagne, heavy hors d'oeuvres, five hundred well-heeled strangers, enough staff to circulate food and wine for the masses, one gregarious groom, and one extremely shy bride.

And twinkle lights. One must never forget the twinkle lights.

This pre-wedding extravaganza is why I'm now standing in an outrageously expensive Elie Saab column of the palest ivory satin and sky-high Jimmy Choo heels in the ballroom of Cheekwood mansion quaffing champagne as if my life depends on it. One wall of the ballroom

has been lit up all evening with tasteful black and white photographs from our courtship, interspersed with photos of Jack on site in foreign countries, holding babies during their inoculations and drilling water wells, part of his duties with the Compton Foundation, a hugely successful and popular philanthropic endeavor. There are even a few shots of me in my studio, and my paintings. They look so fascinating in monochrome, it has me itching to sneak away to my studio tonight, though this isn't going to happen. A-I don't often like the results when I paint drunk. B-We leave tomorrow for Isola, ergo, there is no more painting time for me until after the wedding.

Jack senses me watching him. His smile grows wider, into a grin that is pure, sheer delight. *You are mine, and I am yours, and we are so very lucky*, it says. He tips his glass my direction, and I tip mine in return, then take a sip, promptly spilling a teensy bit onto the front of my dress. Shit. I have definitely been over-served.

I set the glass down on the nearest table and discreetly dab at my collarbones with my cocktail napkin, feeling the scratchy embossing of our conjoined initials in golden scroll against my bare skin.

Jack must have seen my faux pas because he crosses the room like a torpedo. He's not upset, he's highly amused, judging by the rumbles of laughter coming from his broad chest. His arms encircle my waist and he sweeps me up into a hug that takes my feet off the ground. He whirls me in a circle.

"Darling, darling, my beautiful, lovely, wet darling."

"Oh good, you're tipsy, too. Set me down, you silly man."

But there is a tinkling noise, metal chiming against the champagne flutes, which is how I've gotten so merry to start with. So. Many. Toasts.

Jack kisses me, still twirling. The crowd cheer uproariously, and my head spins in all the right ways. Nothing matters but this—this man, me in his arms, our lips touching. Forever. He's mine forever.

"Want to get out of here?" he whispers, stopping finally. I slide down his body like a ballerina until my toes touch the hardwood.

"God, yes. Now?"

"Now."

"Excellent. Can we just sneak out? Irish goodbye in three, two, one..."

"Darling, we can do whatever we want. It's our party. But let's say goodbye, just to be polite." He turns to the crowd and puts up a hand, and silence descends on the room.

His power over people is magnetic. If he ever wanted to take over his father's company, the world would bend over backward to pave his way. Lucky for me, Jack is content with the Foundation.

"Thank you, all, for a lovely evening. So glad you've been able to celebrate with us. We'll see you on the other side."

Quick as a magician, Jack has us out of the room and on the slate path to the black Suburban waiting outside before the applause and calls of best wishes and congratulations fully dies down. His personal security guards, Gideon and Malcom, materialize like well-armed ghosts and fall in silently behind us. I call them the Crows because they are practically identical, with their buzz cuts and beefy arms, dressed in unrelenting black from head-to-toe, and hover,

continuously, over their prize. How his people know when and where to be ready for him is still anyone's guess. I suppose I'll learn. Though Jack moved into my house in 12<sup>th</sup> South several months ago, he still travels constantly, and I've rarely accompanied him on business.

So far, I've managed to escape the Crows' scrutiny. It is only at my insistence that they don't flank Jack and me twenty-four/seven. Once we're married, that will change. The Crows will be at my side, too, and I don't have a choice in the matter. There have already been too many security briefings for my taste.

I collapse into the back of the Suburban and kick off my heels, sighing in relief.

Jack leans over and nuzzles my neck. "You smell like Moët & Chandon."

"I suppose there are worse things. The party was fun. I'm sorry your mom had to miss it."

"No, you're not. But that's fine. She and Henna are going wild at the Villa, running the servants ragged getting everything prepared. All we have to do is show up and smile."

"I love your mom. She's just a bit...intimidating."

"She will *love* hearing that. Speaking of, did you speak to yours tonight?"

"For a moment. She called when they arrived in Rome. Said Brian and Harper are making noises about never coming home. She said they'll meet us on Isola Thursday. At least we'll have a day to decompress before my family descends."

An inadvertent sigh slips from my lips. I love my family, but we aren't terribly close. Everyone is pursuing their own agendas, their own lives. My sister has been acting especially weird lately, and that's saying something.

Truth be told... I think there's a little jealousy going on. Things have been strained since Jack and I announced our engagement.

"Good. The majority of the guests should be arriving Thursday morning as well. Then Friday will be the rehearsal, and Saturday, you, my darling, will officially be Mrs. Compton."

"I like the sound of that."

He kisses me lightly. "I do, too."

Jack's hand is wandering up my thigh, but I bat it away. "If you're looking for postprandial treats, you'll have to wait until later, cowboy."

"They don't care," he murmurs into my ear, but I shake my head.

"I care. Wait until we're alone, and then you can have your dessert. I noticed you passed on the macarons."

He flops back into the seat. "They were stale. Mom will be livid."

"They were? I thought they were yummy."

"You'll learn. Once you've had one fresh out of the ovens on the Champs-Élysées, you'll see what I mean."

"You, my darling, are a snob."

"And you love me."

He kisses me sweetly, and the Suburban pulls to the curb in front our house. We spill out, both loose and uncoordinated, under the watchful eyes of the Crows. Gideon stays with us while Malcolm sweeps the house. He gives us the all clear. Once we're inside, they disappear into whatever crevice they live in overnight.

I carry my heels in one hand, grateful for the lack of stress on my arches. Jack tosses his jacket over the barstool at the eat-in counter, tugs at his tie and unbuttons his collar, rolls up



his sleeves, the motions so quick, so practiced and fluid, it's hypnotizing. He sees me watching and makes it into a tease, stepping closer with each turn of the fabric.

"You should try that with the buttons," I say, running my tongue over my lips.

He grins, lazy and confident. "Naw. I'll let you have the honor."

A step closer, another. My hand lands on his chest. My mouth tips up to his.

I smell something odd, something acrid and primordial, and step back.

"What the hell is that?" he says, pulling away.

"I don't know. It smells terrible. Like burning hair. Is something on fire?"

"Shh," he says, straining, listening. All I hear is the air conditioner. But no, there it is. A thump. A creak. The unmistakable noise of footsteps.

Someone is in the house. Someone is upstairs in our house.

Jack bolts from my side, takes the stairs two at a time. I follow, just in time to see the door to the attic is open.

"Get Gideon and Malcolm," Jack shouts over his shoulder, throwing himself headlong into the darkness. But I am frozen. My mind can't process what's happening. I am cold with terror, the adrenaline rush forcing away my reason. I can't think. I can't move.

A masked man bursts from the darkness above and launches himself down the stairs. I am in his way, and he knocks me to the ground in his haste. I smash backward into the wall, banging my head hard against the chair rail. Jack is there a heartbeat later, calling for the Crows as he throws himself at the intruder, arms out, a perfect flying tackle. They go down hard on the landing, scuffling, locked in a deadly battle. Jack is the bigger man, he has the leverage he needs to get an arm on the man's windpipe, but the intruder is quick, kicking out at Jack's stomach until he connects and Jack is knocked off.

This gives the intruder the upper hand. He flips Jack onto his back and punching wildly while reaching back to his waistband. My mind registers the gun, and the peril Jack is in, and without another thought, I kick the man's arm just as his fingers close around the gun's grip. It spins away, clattering against the baseboards. We lunge for it at the same time. I am closer. I get there first.

The shot is deafening.

The intruder falls to the floor at my feet, moaning, squirming. Blood pours from his side. So much blood. The man bleeds and bleeds and bleeds until he is still. I watch, fascinated, as a small trickle of crimson runs toward my bare foot.

Then Malcolm and Gideon are hoisting me to my feet, and the roaring in my head overwhelms me.

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