

Praise for **READY OR NOT**

“A clever, engrossing story with fabulous characters and an unexpected ending. It’s Tracy Darnton’s most gripping YA thriller yet!”

– **SUE WALLMAN**, author of *I Know You Did It*

“A brilliantly addictive mystery-thriller, perfect for fans of *We Were Liars* and Karen McManus. I’m still reeling from that final twist!”

– **KAT ELLIS**, author of *Wicked Little Deeds*

“An engrossing read. I found the ending very clever and satisfying.”

– **ANNE CASSIDY**, author of *Looking for JJ*

“A taut, sharp-edged thriller full of captivatingly messy characters. Tracy Darnton’s writing gets inside your head and refuses to leave, even after you’ve finished the final heart-stopping pages. Tense, clever and impossible to put down.”

– **KATHRYN FOXFIELD**, author of *Good Girls Die First*

“A pacy, unpredictable, clever thriller from the queen of suspense herself.”

– **SINÉAD O’HART**, author of *The Eye of the North*

“An unputdownable, missing person mystery with the usual Darnton pace and intrigue.”

– **PENNY JOELSON**, author of *Girl in the Window*

“I devoured this tense and twisty novel in one sitting.

You may never play hide and seek again...”

– **BRYONY PEARCE**, author of *Savage Island*

“Packed with intrigue and layer upon layer of secrets, *Ready or Not* will keep you gripped and guessing right up to the end! This riveting thriller is not to be missed!”

– **SAVITA KALHAN**, author of *That Asian Kid*

“The kind of book that you race to finish to find out what happened. Loved it.”

– **LOU ABERCROMBIE**, author of *Coming Up for Air*

“A clever, gripping story full of mystery, intrigue and secrets, with a shocking twist at the end that will keep you wondering long after you’ve finished the final page.

A psychological thriller that you won’t want to put down.”

– **MEL DARBON**, author of *Rosie Loves Jack*

“Trust me, you are not prepared for the tightly plotted twists and turns of *Ready Or Not*. Tracy Darnton’s latest thriller is on another level ... and the ending will take your breath away. Buckle up and prepare for the ride of your life.

– **CHARLEY ROBINSON**, YA and Fantasy Bookseller, *The Rabbit Hole*, *Brigg*

*To Jen, Lucy and Sam with happy memories of Cornish holidays
To my goddaughter Hannah W
And to all the fantastic librarians and booksellers who've gone
above and beyond in these tricky times*

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TRACY DARNTON

READY

OR

NOT

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

That was the day I stopped playing games. You're meant to find everyone in hide-and-seek. Close your eyes and count to twenty. But when I opened them, I couldn't find Kat.

None of us could.

But people don't just disappear, do they?

12 August 2018

Creek House, Cornwall, SW England

I counted to twenty in that droning voice where you stretch out the numbers. Like the way you respond in assembly at junior school – Go-od morn-ing ev-ery-one. I counted like that because we'd been playing this game together at Creek House since we were little kids and started calling ourselves the Creekers. Every August. Every New Year's Eve. When our three families got together in the holidays, we played all sorts of sports on the uneven lawn – cricket, rounders, badminton, tennis. Everyone joined in, sporty or not. And we played board games like Cluedo, Pictionary and Ticket to Ride or mad games of charades and treasure hunts.

But I always loved hide-and-seek the most. It plays to my strengths. I'm good at watching and waiting and keeping quiet. At New Year we played indoors, hiding in cupboards and draughty hallways behind the heavy, dusty

curtains. But for our summer visits, we had the garden – terraces, a sloping lawn and dense trees and shrubs which ran alongside the water down to the river beach. The old summerhouse, the log shed, the garages – there were plenty of possibilities and a reassuring familiarity to it all. As we got older, it became only us kids playing games, not the adults. Not hide-and-seek anyway. They'd stay indoors, sitting round the kitchen table with an endless supply of wine, full of gossip and insider jokes, pretending they were still the same people who'd met at university.

That day in August was long and sunny and warm. It was the final day of our holiday all together, our last-night party. We'd downed bottles of cheap cider sitting out on the lawn, looking down at the creek, before dancing like no one was watching. We were waiting for dusk to fall. I'd asked for the game – the older ones wanted to stay drinking and chatting. They did it to indulge me, the baby of the group. Kat pushed me into volunteering to go first.

She squeezed my hand. Her breath was heavy with the smell of the French cigarettes she'd taken to smoking to annoy her dad, who wasn't even there. "No cheating, Mills. I know what you're like," she whispered. She lifted my hands to cover my eyes. "I know exactly what you're like," she repeated, as she ran softly away across the lawn. I watched through my fingers as Matt bounded off and disappeared into the dark of the shrubs before I even started counting. His sister Jem wobbled back in the direction of the terrace,

tripping over her own feet. She'd been glugging one of her dad's terrible cocktails. Charlie walked off towards the woods – he never rushed for anyone. Kat began counting loudly in French, shouting as she ran further away. *Un, deux, trois*. She wasn't French, just liked to pretend she was fluent after an exchange trip to Paris. It had only lasted two weeks, but she'd come back with an affected way of shrugging her shoulders and a collection of new exclamations and insults. It annoyed the hell out of Charlie. But they're twins, they thrive on annoying each other.

I began my count at full volume so Kat would stop hers. *One, two, three*. I was already thinking about the next round, about where *I* would go to hide. I preferred hiding to seeking. I was better at it. Maybe I'd take the space hollowed out in the yew – low branches to sit on and leaves so thick that no one could see inside but you could watch other people. I liked following the comings and goings of Creek House. Unobserved.

Fo-ur, fi-ve, si-x.

Things were changing. Mum said it was probably the last time all of us would come in August. It was getting too complicated as us kids got older, with school trips and impending gap years. And Dad hadn't been able to come with us this time because of work. He'd also muttered about not wanting to use up his holiday in the same place, with the same people, every year. But I liked that it was always the same.

Se-ven, eigh-t, ni-ne.

Things had definitely been weird since the twins' parents split up. No more Rob, but a new boyfriend for Liz each time who always tried too hard to fit in. Dom was the current one and way younger than Liz which meant he thought it was OK to engage us in conversation about TikTok and say 'cool' a lot.

Te-n, ele-ven, twel-ve.

A twig snapped and I peeped through my fingers. There was a blur of a tall figure in a dark jacket nearer the house. It couldn't be Matt or Charlie. Maybe Dom had finally decided to abandon the grown-ups for the Creekers. We were more fun.

Thir-teen, four-teen, fif-teen.

I strained to hear what was going on around me. The distant sound of a motorboat, laughter from somewhere towards the old summerhouse, startled crows taking flight, feet running across the grass and the gravel path, whispers. Sound always echoed and bounced around the creek. I tried to build a mental picture of the familiar and the unfamiliar, already planning a route to pick up the others. I'd get Jem first. Her giggling would give her away.

Six-teen, sev-en-teen, eigh-teen.

Time was nearly up. I was dizzy. I hadn't had half as much to drink as Jem, but I was regretting having anything at all. Kat had pushed it on me when I didn't want it, with the usual 'joke' that I was the fun police. But now I was feeling

way too fragile to run around after them all as quickly as usual. I would take it slowly. I'd creep up on them in the darkness, silent as the grave.

I stretched out the last seconds like I always did. *Nineteen and a quarter, nineteen and a half, nineteen and three-quarters.*

Twenty!

I opened my eyes and shouted: "Coming, ready or not."

Notebook of Millie Thomas. Private.

When someone goes missing, everything changes. Especially when they disappear into thin air like a magician's trick.

Nothing is the same.

No one is the same.

Dear Kat,

Writing to you is meant to help. Even if the letters aren't proper ones and never get posted and just sit here in my notebook. That's what the counsellor Mrs Edmondson said.

But then she's said a lot of things that were meant to help but didn't.

Seeing Mrs E keeps Mum and Dad off my case. It gets me out of things, like now. Mum was going on again about how I should go out more once my GCSEs are over, meet up with the friends I really don't have.

The girls at school were kind at first, curious. But everyone loses patience in the end, and sympathy gets exhausted. They don't want to hang out with someone miserable. But that's OK because no one else measures up to you on the friend front.

So, this evening, I stopped the usual circular conversation in the best way I know how – I said I needed to write my letter like Mrs Edmondson suggested. Doctor's orders. And Mum and Dad can't argue with that, can they?

Not when they know how important it is, not when they don't want any repeat of the dark days.

Lots of love,

Millie-Moo xxx

P.S. Don't worry. No one will ever replace you, Kat.

June 2019

Missing: 302 days

As soon as I get back from school, I sense the atmosphere in the house. Kat's mum is here again, red-eyed. Liz is dressed in her new uniform of a big, baggy cardigan and jeans with a stain on the knee. She's huddled with Mum in the kitchen. By the number of empty mugs in the sink, I'm guessing she's been here a while. Today there's no wine bottles but it is only four in the afternoon so there's still plenty of time. And she'll be staying a while. She always does.

I don't want to be a cow, but I wish she wasn't here, that she didn't come all this way to cast a massive dark cloud. Even when Rob left her, she wasn't like this. She was angry and noisy and feisty then. Now she's broken.

And none of us can fix her.

Only Kat.

Mum gives me that look. The one that means I merely say 'Hi' and take a glass of water and a handful of biscuits and retreat to the lounge. I sit on the sofa and pull out my phone.

Kat's details flash up on my timeline in another of the Missing posts. It must be a few weeks since that last happened, but it always makes my stomach lurch when I scroll down and come across her picture. The photo this time is one I remember from her Instagram account. She's wearing skinny jeans and a soft blue jumper with a silver

star in the centre. Her hair is straightened, hanging loose on her shoulders, and she's doing the pose; her lips slightly pouting, one leg in front of the other, hands on hips.

Help us trace Katherine (Kat) Berkley, 16. She's white, 5 ft 7ins tall, brown eyes, long red hair with a fringe. She was last seen in south Cornwall on 12th August 2018 but lives in the Bristol area. Any info call 101, ref KB10127.

Kat – if you read this, please let us know you are safe –
call your family or 101.

#FindKat

It's been nearly ten months – 302 days to be precise. Why would she call now? And who are all these people who never met her liking the post and passing it round?

Dad's key turns in the lock. It's too late to retreat upstairs before I get the full exam post-mortem.

"Millie, you're back already." He ruffles my hair like I'm five, or a labradoodle. "How did it go?"

"It was OK. I ran out of time a bit on the last couple of questions, but everyone said that afterwards. You were right – unreliable narrators came up."

My parents' interest in my GCSE performance is stifling. The exam timetable is displayed on the kitchen wall like a military campaign with stages to be ticked off. A colossal, colour-coded revision timetable is pinned up next to it,

alongside articles cut out of the newspaper, with no sense of irony, about how to cope with exam stress. (*Spoiler alert* – not like this.) A giant 'Good Luck' card sits on the shelf. Highlighter pens, Post-it notes and index cards lie in a box on the table, alongside my 'healthy snacks'. Mum and Dad wrote to my school demanding they ask the exam board for special dispensation for 'all the upset' and the lessons I missed last autumn.

"Have a short break before you get Mum to test you on your French for tomorrow."

"It's fine, Dad. Honestly." I know enough French words to pass the A-level. "Liz is here."

Dad frowns and closes his eyes briefly. "Again. I see," he says wearily. "It's your last week. You need a calm house." He calls to Mum and asks if he can have a quick word. My stomach begins to churn. And it's nothing to do with the exams.

It takes about three minutes for it to escalate. I slide past them and into the kitchen. I close the door between the kitchen and the hall. They're arguing in loud whispers and hisses. If I can hear them, I'm pretty sure Liz will be able to. Except she's lost in one of her moments again. I clear my throat but she doesn't move or look up. She keeps staring down at the glass in front of her. The wine has been opened after all.

I turn on the radio to drown out Mum and Dad. Classic FM fills the kitchen. It's meant to be good to revise to.

I straighten the Polaroid photo on the fridge. All of us last summer. Kat with her statement hair, me mousy brown with a sunburnt nose and Jem, spiky blond hair and tanned. Jem is tall, like her mum, inches above me. Kat's in the centre, as usual, her arms intertwined with ours on each side. Charlie's leaping up to make rabbit ears behind Matt's fuzzy blond mop of hair. They're both in shorts and loud Hawaiian-style party shirts. There's nothing to hint that it's the last group photo we would ever have. We look like we're on the edge of something, the start of our future. We look like we're the best of friends.

Liz barely notices me sit down opposite her. When she raises her eyes, set in sunken, dark circles, she reaches out her hand to mine.

"Millie – dear, kind, Millie-Moo." Her nails are chipped, no polish.

I tense up. "Shall I make you a cup of tea?" I don't know what I should do for her but that's what everybody else does.

Her hand tightens on mine slightly. "I've had enough tea. To. Last. Me. A. Lifetime." She takes two gulps of the wine instead and we sit in awkward silence for a few minutes before she suddenly says: "You'd tell me, Millie, wouldn't you?" Her eyes are focused on me now, her gaze intense. "If you knew anything? Anything at all?"

"Of course," I say, uncomfortable. We've had this conversation before. She's still holding my hand and her

nails are digging into the soft flesh of my palm.

"Because I think you *do* know something," she says. Then, in a whisper: "But you can tell me, Millie. Millie-Moo."

I shake my head slowly, try to pull my hand back, but she has it in a firm hold, and her other hand has moved to grip my wrist. "I don't. You're ... you're hurting me, Liz. I don't know anything."

"You won't get into any trouble, I promise." Her voice turns into a slow hiss as she squeezes out the words. "We've all made mistakes, trusted people we shouldn't have."

I shake my head again. "I'd have said. I'd have told you if I knew anything at all."

A slow, fat tear runs down her cheek.

As Dad opens the door and sees me, she releases her grip and I pull back my hand and rub my palm.

"Everything OK in here?" he asks, uncertain what he's seen, or not seen. I leap up to fill the kettle, to make the tea Liz doesn't want.

I can't give her anything she wants.

I can't tell her anything she wants to hear.

I promised Kat.

Dear Kat,

If you've been paying attention, you'll have seen I'm finding it hard to get you out of my head.

A thought gets triggered when I'd like to show or tell you something.

Sometimes the trigger is a smell. Don't worry – I can see the shock on your face, you who always sprayed half the contents of the Boots perfume hall when you walked through it. I should say scent, not smell. Because last month it was lemons. That lemony shampoo you had – I bought you the matching shower gel and the body spray. They were expensive. You probably don't remember.

So, in Food, Mr Finch was off sick. And this supply teacher told us to research and adapt a recipe involving citrus. She said Vitamin C was sure to come up in the exam, which instantly got everyone's attention. She tipped a bag of lemons on to the workbench and I picked one up and held it to my nose. For ages. Weird, I know.

Because all I could think about was you and the lemony shampoo.

Even in a dumb lesson, there you are. Not leaving me alone.

Ingredients for a one-sided friendship

Lemons

Secrets

Lies

Method

Throw all your ingredients haphazardly into a bowl. Mix them up.

Cover with a clean tea towel and leave in a cool place. For a really long time. All your life.

Let it sit. Let it fester.

Every now and then dare to lift the cover and check on your friendship. See if it's the way it's meant to be; if it's growing, doubling in size. Or is it shrinking? Is it rancid and mouldy?

Miss Whatever-Her-Name was quietly reading my 'recipe' over my shoulder. She was disconcerted (my new favourite word). She didn't know what to do with it. That's not what they sign up for, is it, supply teachers? They don't want a situation to deal with.

She edged closer to the utensils and sat casually, or not so casually, by the knife block and fiddled with the buttons on her cardigan. At the end of the lesson, she made me stay behind and suggested I have a word with my form tutor if there was anything troubling me.

Thank God, she didn't know I already see Mrs Edmondson. She'd have been even more disconcerted.

I wrote a recipe, that's all.

Just not the one she wanted. She didn't even give me marks for the clean tea towel reference.

I'm rambling, Kat. But that's what I mean about you,

the absence of you. You pop up in unexpected places. Your thoughts, your laugh, your meanness.

Your lemony shampoo.

Lots of love,

Millie-Moo xx

13 August 2018

Missing: 12 hours

There was nowhere to hide from the awfulness. It was still sunny outside, still the summer holidays. But inside it was like we were in a TV drama that we couldn't switch off. Liz was in bits, alternating between vomiting and weeping. Rob had arrived alone at 6.30 a.m. after Nick called him. He sat grim-faced and huddled with his old friend, their recent argument forgotten. We'd had enough drama. Mum and Anna had stepped up to provide refreshments and be the shoulders to cry on. Dad was driving down from Berkshire. He'd sounded so shaken up on the phone. I guess Mum, Dad, Nick and Anna were secretly relieved that it was Kat and not their child who'd disappeared into thin air.

The remaining Creekers gathered in the TV room. Charlie flicked through the news channels like he expected Kat to pop up on screen and tell us all she was OK. Matt hugged Jem for what seemed like five minutes and she sobbed on his shoulder. I didn't cry. It wasn't real. Like I was watching us from above.

Dom drifted between the different areas, settling here and there but fitting nowhere. His packed bags sat by the door waiting for his taxi out of there. Once we knew Rob was on his way from the hotel, it was the only option. This was way more crisis than he'd signed up to as Liz's date for the week. To be fair, Dom had been great through the night when Liz