



A gripping psychological thriller

A
MOTHER'S
SACRIFICE
GEMMA METCALFE

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**A Mother's Sacrifice: A
brand new psychological
thriller with a gripping twist**

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A Mother's Sacrifice: A brand new psychological thriller with a gripping twist / G. Metcalfe — «HarperCollins»,

'Thrilling, compelling and thought-provoking. This author has a very bright future ahead of her.' Angela Marsons, author of the Detective Kim Stone series. 'A clever, tense read that deserves to do well. Gemma Metcalfe is a fresh new talent and A Mother's Sacrifice will have you gripped from start to finish.' Phoebe Morgan, author of The Doll House It was fate that she crossed my path. And that is why I chose her. The day Louisa and James bring their newborn son home from the hospital marks a new beginning for all of them. To hold their child in their arms, makes all the stress and trauma of fertility treatment worth it. Little Cory is theirs and theirs alone. Or so they think... After her mother's suicide when she was a child, Louisa's life took an even darker turn. But meeting James changed everything. She can trust him to protect her, and to never leave her. Even if deep down, she worries that she has never told him the full truth about her past, or the truth about their baby. But someone knows all her secrets – and that person is watching and waiting, with a twisted game that will try to take everything Louisa holds dear. Perfect for fans of Louise Jensen. Praise for Gemma Metcalfe 'A brilliant debut, this tense and original story deserves to be read!' B A Paris on Trust me, best-selling author of Behind Closed Doors 'Gemma Metcalfe turns the screw until the tension is almost unbearable. A fast-paced debut with a twist that made me gasp.' Mark Edwards on Trust Me, best-selling author of The Devil's Work 'Trust Me is a brilliantly fast paced read, with a unique premise... add to that a spectacular twist, and I couldn't turn the pages fast enough.' Lisa Hall on Trust Me, author of Between You and Me

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God ensured she crossed my path. And that is why I chose her.

The day Louisa and James bring their newborn son home from the hospital marks a new beginning for all of them. To hold their child in their arms makes all the stress and trauma of fertility treatment worth it. Little Cory is theirs and theirs alone. Or so they think...

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[Also by Gemma Metcalfe](#)

Trust Me

A Mother's Sacrifice

Gemma Metcalfe



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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GEMMA METCALFE is a Manchester-born author who now lives in sunny Tenerife with her husband, Danny, and two crazy rescue dogs, Dora and Diego. By day, Gemma can be found working as a primary school teacher, but as the sun sets, she ditches the glitter and glue and becomes a writer of psychological thrillers. An established drama queen, she admits to having a rather warped imagination, and loves writing original plots with shocking twists. The plot for her debut novel, *Trust Me*, is loosely based on her experiences as a call-centre operative, where she was never quite sure who would answer the phone!

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For Danny

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[PROLOGUE](#)

The woman's nightdress blew against her bare legs as she made her way towards the bridge. The voices inside her head continued to taunt her; an acidic sewer of hate which, over the past four weeks, had eaten away at her sanity, grinding her down to nothing but flesh and bone.

She laughed out loud into the black abyss of the night sky, knowing that soon, their mocking words would die on their cruel lips; like the final smirk of a guilty prisoner on death row.

Outwardly, her body continued to play the game, her top and bottom teeth clamping together, the cold November night stiffening the muscles in her arms and legs. She blew out a knot of fear, watched in awe as it kissed the freezing air in front of her, physically morphing itself into something tangible, before slowly evaporating away to nothing.

The child in her arms began to stir. She responded by gently pushing him into the softness of her chest; his shock of red hair tickling the underbelly of her chin. He began to suckle her neck, hunger morphing his nasally snuffle into a raspy moan.

'Shhh baby,' she cooed into his ear. 'Everything will be all right.'

As she stepped on to the bridge, the storm intensified, the force almost knocking her off her feet. Rain continued to hammer down on top of her, the wind cutting it through the sky at an odd angle. At 3 a.m., the bridge was deserted, the only sound coming from the angry outbursts of the swollen River Dee below, which threatened to burst its banks.

Climbing over the railings was somewhat fiddly, especially while trying to keep hold of the baby. He squirmed beneath her, his podgy fist grasping hold of her soaked auburn hair, yanking it down and almost pulling it from its roots. She held tightly hold of the railing as she leaned over the river, her arm twisted behind her at an uncomfortable angle. Her free hand rested itself on the baby's back, his warm body heating her palm.

The voices inside her head began to intensify, a choir of heckles rising and falling in response to the conductor's orders.

'Death! Where is your sting?' Lifting her head up to the night sky, she loosened her grip on the railing.

In a matter of seconds, it would all be over...

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Louisa

2014–Now

'Oh God no, please no!'

I clamp my teeth together and squeeze my eyes shut as the all-too-familiar dull ache wraps itself around my abdomen and lower back, my uterus compressing under what can only be described as the steely jaws of a mechanical vice.

'Come on, Louisa, you can do it!' My husband, James, squeezes my hand at the exact same moment the ache gives way to a searing hot pain which slices my insides in half, bringing forth a scream which strips the skin from my throat. 'No, really, I can't, you'll have to do it for me!'

A nasally snort flies out of his nose.

'I'm glad you're finding this amusing.'

'Sorry,' he says, peeling back his grin. 'You know I would if I could.'

'As if! You still think man flu's a thing!' Grabbing hold of the plastic mouthpiece from the gas and air, I shove it into my mouth and suck. Why did I want a baby so much? Why oh why oh why!

'Come on now, Louisa.' The familiar brusque tone of the midwife severs my thoughts. 'The head's almost out, another big push now, right into your bottom. You can do it.'

'No, I can't, why does everybody keep saying that?' I bring the mouthpiece out of my mouth just long enough to try and make the midwife understand that I really am dying. It's only now I realise she isn't the same one who gave me the gas and air a few hours ago, nor is she the one who induced me yesterday morning. This one is short and stocky and, judging by her gravelly voice, smokes around sixty fags a day. 'You need to make this stop!' Fat tears roll down my cheeks as I ready myself for the next contraction. 'I'm actually going to die, please don't let me die!'

'Not much longer now, sweetheart, you're doing amazingly well!' James sidles onto the bed next to me and wraps his arm around me. He smells of coffee and cigarettes which is somewhat comforting even though it makes me gag. 'Just calm down and practise your breathing exercises.' He reaches over and pushes my sopping wet fringe back off my forehead.

'You have absolutely no idea, it's like shitting out a...'. My words fall away as another, much more powerful contraction rips through me without warning, plunging me down into a world without sight or sound. I writhe around on the bed, bare legs and feet twisting themselves into impossible positions, the starchy-white bedsheets underneath me feeling like freshly laid stinging nettles.

'Push, Louisa, push and hold, push and hold.' The midwife's orders somehow cut through the pain, coinciding with an almighty urge to empty out the contents of my insides. I'm vaguely aware of a low, almost primal, grunting noise as a ring of fire ignites between my legs, and just as I feel I can't possibly take it any more, James's voice explodes into my eardrum.

'Oh my God, the head's out. Lou, we're having a baby!'

The grip on my abdomen loosens and my vision slowly returns, a fizz of excitement rippling through me. 'And here's me thinking it was a dodgy curry.' I manage to laugh through my tears, the gas and air making me slightly delirious. Looking up for the briefest of seconds, my eyes connect with James's, his own red-rimmed and swollen. I notice for the first time how his jet-black hair is stuck up through the middle where he's no doubt shoved his hand continuously through it over the past few hours, a sure sign that beneath his carefully placed humour he is as terrified as I am.

'Right, Louisa, when you next get an urge, you need to push like you've never pushed before.' The midwife's head pops up from between my legs, reminding me of the arcade game 'splat a rat'.

'Easy for you to say.' I lie rigid, terrified to move a muscle in case I accidentally suck my offspring back up my vagina! 'Is he still there, James? Is he okay, is he normal?'

'Lou, it's fascinating. It's a bloody miracle. I can see his head.' James whips out his iPhone, the flash cutting across my line of vision.

'You dare!'

'Not even a little selfie?'

'Louisa!' The midwife's voice rises in volume. 'It's vital you push now, come on, baby needs you!'

I flick my eyes over to James whose smile appears to have fallen from his face. 'Is she panicking? Why's she panicking? What's happening?'

'No, she's not, don't worry.' He glances over at the midwife, his lips slightly parted. 'Just do as she says, Lou,' he says after a half beat. 'Push, push now!'

'I can't, I'm too scared. I'm going to hurt him!' I shake my head at the midwife, certain I can't go on any longer, certain that I'm somehow going to suffocate my baby boy. Visions of his scan picture swirl in front of my eyes, his ski-slope nose so like my own, his tiny hand balled up into a fist. 'It's

a boy,' the sonographer had said, zooming in to show us the evidence. It had seemed surreal, like looking at somebody else's baby, both fascinating and terrifying seeing my name positioned at the top of the scan. 'I'll always protect you,' I whispered to the grainy image, my finger tracing the shape of his mouth.

Now, four months later, here I am, having to make good on my promise and failing at the first hurdle. 'Is he all right, is he breathing?'

The midwife breaks eye contact with me, looks over at the heart monitor, unease flitting across her face.

'What the hell is happening? Just tell me!' My eyes flick from the midwife to James, another contraction starting somewhere in my lower back.

James swallows hard before grabbing tightly hold of my hand. 'The baby...' He looks down between my legs. 'The cord, it seems to...'

'Your baby's in distress, Louisa.' The midwife jumps up and pushes my left leg back so it's virtually wrapped around my neck like I'm some kind of fucking contortionist.

'Oh my God, just pull him out, please!'

'Enough!' Her tone is enough to silence me. 'The cord is wrapped around your baby's neck and it's vital you push right now so I can try and loosen it!'

I push with every last ounce of strength, not allowing myself to think or feel anything apart from the sickening realisation that my baby's in danger. I push and grunt and pant for what seems like hours, all the while picturing the face of my half-born child, the baby who's haunted my dreams and nightmares for the past thirteen years.

'Stop!' The midwife's voice cuts through the pain. 'Stop pushing. He's stuck. Hold the push, hold it now!'

'I don't know what I'm supposed to do, please help me!' The contractions continue to ripple through me, so quickly now that I'm no longer sure where one ends and another begins. I bite down on my bottom lip so hard I draw blood, feel a rib crack under the pressure.

'Louisa, stop pushing!' James's fear is almost palpable.

I grab hold of his hand and feel his bones crunch underneath my grasp as another contraction tears me apart. 'I can't stop, I can't!'

Then, without any kind of warning, everything around me speeds up, like I am watching an old VCR on fast forward. The midwife dives up and over to the far wall, pressing a button which causes a siren to blare, the sound puncturing my eardrum right at the same moment the double doors fly open, spewing out masses of people who swarm around me like flies.

'We need to carry out an episiotomy,' I hear her say to somebody in a white coat who floats just out of reach. 'The cord's double-looped and baby's heart rate has dipped dangerously low.'

Everything slowly starts to fade away, sights and sounds spliced through their middle. I stare out at my surroundings through smudged lenses, doctors and nurses melting into the background until only streaks of colour skim across my vision. I try to fight my way out, to bring myself back to the present in order to save my baby, but I am trapped, trapped in a silent world where nothing is how it should be.

'Louisa, I'm Doctor Dhingra. The midwife is going to make a small cut in order to get your baby out.' I look over to the source of the sound, my brain unable to process what is being said. I nod, dumbfounded, and am only vaguely aware of the burning pain between my legs, followed closely by the tugging sensation which seems to last for an eternity.

James's voice washes over me. I know he is shouting but I can't quite make out what he is saying, only that it is bad. I blink over at him. He is now on the other side of the room, bent double, a metal trolley to the side of him, surrounded by several strangers who all poke and prod a lifeless scrap of purple flesh in the centre. Inside I scream. Inside I thrash around and pray to God to help

the doctors save the little scrap of flesh on the trolley because he might not look like anything to them but to me he is everything.

Eerie silence falls down all around me, my own ragged breaths the only sound in the room. 'Why isn't he crying?' My voice is barely a whisper. 'What's happened to my baby?'

James looks over at me, his head shaking ever so slightly from side to side. 'I'm sorry,' he mouths, tears streaming from his eyes. 'I'm so sorry.'

As his words resonate within me, I am suddenly pulled back into the past, once again looking out through five-year-old eyes, the smell of burnt toast in my nostrils, my world collapsing like dominoes all around me. I don't move, can't move, a scream of terror trapped inside my throat.

At first I don't understand what's happening. Why is a baby crying somewhere in my mother's house? I don't have a brother. I always wanted one but I never got one. And then, slowly and somehow all at once, the shrill cry grabs me by the scruff of the neck and hauls me back into the present, shrinking everything back into focus, the doctors and nurses once again speaking a succession of words I don't understand. The crying continues, rising in volume and pitch. I daren't look, daren't believe, and then before I can think another thought, my baby is on me, causing shock waves to pulsate through me, restarting my broken heart.

I look down at him and he stares up at me, our hearts beating as one, his skin melting into mine. 'Hello, Cory,' I whisper, his name on my lips the most beautiful sound I've ever spoken. 'I'm your mummy.' I look over at James, his face collapsing in on itself as he makes his way over towards us. 'And this is your daddy. And you have no idea how long we've waited to meet you.'

CHAPTER TWO

Louisa

Now

'You're a mum, Louisa. An actual mum.' I whisper the words to my own reflection, causing a smile to spread the entire width of my face.

There's nothing quite like the mirror in a hospital toilet to make you look even worse than you already do. My skin is paper-thin under the harsh glare of the overhead strip light and my coppery-red hair looks like a ransacked bird's nest. And yet none of that stuff seems to matter any more. Because I am a mum.

I love the word 'mum', love how softly it sits on my lips as I speak it out loud. It's an insignificant sound really, one syllable, three measly letters, and yet it means so much to so many. I'm sure it means more to me than most, although I suppose any new mother would say the same. But not every mother has sacrificed what I have to hold the title. Some would probably say I sacrificed too much to have a baby, but, after holding Cory in my arms, I'd have to disagree. I'd do it all again in a heartbeat.

I continue to stare closely into the glass, searching for the person who resides behind my eyes. Outwardly nothing has changed; my freckles still stick together across the bridge of my nose and my top lip remains a fraction too thin. But inside, I am different, I am new. It's almost as if the moment I set eyes on Cory, I too was born into a new world.

I haven't had it easy. My life hasn't always been white picket fences and foreign holidays. For so many years I hoped, prayed even, that one day everything would slot into place, that I would somehow live the life I always knew was out there.

I met James ten years ago, when I was just nineteen and he twenty-nine. He was a trainee anaesthetist at the local hospital where I was an outpatient, my anxious mind reaching new heights as I steamrolled into adulthood. I was smoking a roll-up cigarette under a glass shelter outside the entrance, the cold biting the tips of my fingers as I sucked in nicotine like my life depended on it. I didn't want to continue with the counselling sessions my GP had recommended, didn't like where they were heading. 'Got a light?' James asked, his accent clearly northern but less harsh than the Salford drawl I was used to. I said I did and continued to fumble around inside my handbag for what seemed like hours, the silver clipper lighter nowhere to be seen.

In the end I passed him my roll-up, its filter smeared with blood-red lipstick. 'Sorry,' I muttered, embarrassed by the whole situation. He bent down, cupped his hands around mine as he sucked on the end of his Silk Cut, trying his damndest to light it.

'You fancy a coffee across the road?' he asked. 'It's bloody freezing out here.'

'Sure,' I replied, my voice sounding much more confident than I felt.

We were happy for a while, and I really felt my Happily Ever After had arrived. Then we started to try for a baby...

I wince as I make my way over to the cubicle door, convinced my nether regions have been stitched back together by Buffalo Bill! And don't get me started on the 'first pee'. I thought nothing could be worse than labour pains but it would seem that 'pissing razorblades' is a pretty accurate metaphor for what I've just experienced.

It's now four hours since I gave birth to Cory and at just gone 7 p.m. the maternity ward is heaving with visitors. Shiny helium balloons in various shades of pink and blue float up towards the ceiling, accompanied by the hushed chatter of men, women and children. The air buzzes with excitement and yet there is an almost underlying hush, a collective respect for the newborns who are experiencing life for the very first time. They are all beautiful, all special in their own unique way, some with full heads of hair and others like little squashed-up aliens. Of course none of them are as beautiful as Cory, but I would say that, wouldn't I?

Flimsy white curtains split the ward into several bays. I make my way down the centre aisle, my head raised a little higher than it's ever been before. In the corner bay, sat on a plastic chair, an older woman gazes down at the tiniest baby I have ever seen. She looks almost terrified to move and I can't say I blame her. He must weigh no more than five pounds, minute in comparison to Cory's whopping eight pound nine. His face is covered in downy blond hair and his head is hidden under a white bonnet several sizes too large for him. He wears a chalky-blue sleepsuit with Peter Rabbit embroidered on the top pocket, and his pink blotchy skin looks so soft I almost want to reach out and stroke him. I assume the lady holding him is his grandmother. She seems oblivious to her surroundings, her eyes soaking up every inch of him. The baby's mother is asleep in the hospital bed to the side of them, her face relaxed, almost as if she knows it's okay to switch off because her tiny, delicate son is in the most capable of hands. I can't help the tears that pool into my eyes. I think about my own mother, wonder what kind of grandma she'd have been to Cory had she still been alive. Would she have loved him unconditionally? Would she have cradled him in her arms even though she was terrified he might break? 'He's beautiful. What's his name?'

The lady looks up at me, her eyes shining with pride. 'Jude. Five weeks prem, delivered in under an hour. Little sod couldn't wait to get out.' She tries out a laugh but it's tinged with fear. 'There was a moment when we thought, you know...' She swallows hard, seemingly lost in another moment in time when everything wasn't quite as perfect as it is now. 'Still, he's here now. That's all that matters.' She offers me another smile, seemingly out of courtesy this time, before turning her attention back to little Jude who lies sleeping in her arms, completely oblivious to how much he is adored.

The next two bays have their curtains drawn right the way across so I'm unable to peer in. James always tells me off for being nosy but human beings fascinate me. I could watch them for hours, especially when they don't realise they're being watched. I guess when you grew up the way I did you become hungry to catch snippets of normal life.

Eventually I come to another open booth where a girl, no older than eighteen, stares down through wide eyes at a newborn who lies sleeping on her chest. At twenty-nine I suddenly feel too old to be a first-time mother, although I know in the grand scheme of things I am still pretty young. Unlike the other half-dozen beds in the ward, there are no flowers or cards on this girl's nightstand; there's no helium balloon advertising her child's gender. My heart breaks for her, and I wonder what has gone so very wrong in her life that nobody is here to share the most incredible day of her life.

'Congratulations.' I offer her a tight smile.

'Thank you. And to you.' She looks up only briefly before dropping her gaze.

'Boy or girl?'

She strokes the newborn's back. 'Boy. He's called George.'

'Me too. Cory.'

'Lovely name.'

'And yours.'

A stilted silence hangs between us. 'Is your partner coming?'

She shakes her head.

'Parents?'

'It's just the two of us and that's fine by me.' She looks me squarely in the eye, her jaw tight.

'Well, I'll see you around.' I pause, wait for her to insert her name into the silence, but it doesn't come. I guess I was wrong to think being a mother automatically gave me the right to befriend other mothers. I feel a little sad.

James doesn't appear to notice me as I approach our bay. He is sat on the visitor's chair to the side of the bed, Cory balanced across his arms like he's attempting some kind of circus act. I stop for a moment and watch him, his hand bigger than Cory's head. There's something about the way he sits; awkward, his muscles flexed, his shoulders tense. He is making shushing noises even though Cory isn't making any sound.

'Hey, how's things?'

He flinches before looking up at me. 'Great, brilliant. How are you feeling?'

'Well, they don't warn you about the first pee in antenatal class.' I attempt to laugh but somehow it falls flat. 'You know he won't break, don't you? You can relax your arms a little.'

He smiles, releasing some of the tension in his shoulders. 'Sorry, I keep having flashbacks, you know.'

He doesn't need to elaborate. The image of Cory lying motionless on the hospital trolley isn't one which will disappear from my own memory very easily. 'I know, but he's all right. He's safe now.' My voice holds a confidence which doesn't quite reflect how I feel inside. How can I ever really guarantee his safety? Tragedy strikes all the time, doesn't it? Especially in newborns. SIDS they call it, sudden infant death syndrome. I googled it repeatedly while pregnant, begged James to invest in a breathing monitor, but he rolled his eyes and told me I panicked too much. Perhaps I'll broach the subject again; always better to be safe than sorry.

'There were some cards on the mat when I nipped back earlier – news travels fast.' James nods in the direction of the bed to where four or five cards are piled on top of one another.

'I guess people have been waiting for this moment almost as long as we have.' I sit down on the edge of the bed, wincing as I do, and pick up the first card in the pile. 'You are all right, aren't you?' I ask as I begin to open the card, the distraction allowing me to avoid eye contact.

'Perfect. Why wouldn't I be?'

'No reason.'

The first card is from my Auntie Kath and 'Rosie the Dog'. The second is a Moonpig special from James's cousin, typed in Arial black with a photograph of me and James on our wedding day on the front. Slightly odd but I suppose the thought was there.

'This one's just addressed to me.' I lift up the third envelope in the pile, my name scrawled across the front in what appears to be red fountain pen.

'Secret admirer?' James winks at me, which, even after eight years of marriage, still has the ability to flip my stomach over. 'Open it then,' he says after a second.

I shove my fingers down the side of the flap and prise it open. On the front is a picture of a stork carrying a baby wrapped in a light-blue blanket. 'That's weird,' I say, holding it up for James to see. 'We haven't announced the gender yet. Not unless you've sneaked it onto Facebook without me knowing?'

He barely lifts his eyes. 'Of course I haven't. Who's it off?'

I open it up, stare down at the scrawled red handwriting inside, my mind unable to process what I am reading.

'Lou, who's it off?'

I snap it shut, my stomach twisting into a knot as the words inside begin to knit together in my brain. 'Erm, just a woman from antenatal class, you don't know her.' I place it beside me on the bed and cover it over with my hand.

'A psychic one?'

'What?'

'The blue blanket on the front. You all right, Lou?'

The embossed lettering on the front of the card burns my palm, and yet I daren't lift up my hand. 'I think I'm just exhausted. And visiting time is over. Best you go get some rest.' I hold my breath, praying he leaves without pushing me further.

'If you're sure.' He stands slowly, his heart seemingly in his mouth as he passes Cory over to me. 'I don't think I'll ever get used to holding him.'

'Put him in the cot.' I gesture over to the small, see-through cot with my eyes.

'Really? I thought...'

'He's asleep.' My words come out sharper than I intended. 'You shouldn't indulge babies. The book says.'

'Well, if the book says.' He laughs and rolls his eyes but thankfully places Cory down in the cot without further question.

'I'll see you tomorrow then.'

'Yeah, see you tomorrow. And Lou...' he says after a moment. 'I am happy. More than I ever could have imagined.'

Tears prick the back of my eyes and I know without any doubt that I can never allow James to see inside the card. No matter what has gone before, I am a mum, my baby is safe, and my husband is happy.

Surely that's all that matters?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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