

He Said/She Said

Also by Erin Kelly

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With Chris Chibnall

*Broadchurch*

*Erin Kelly*

# He Said/She Said



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For my sister, Shona



A total eclipse of the sun has five stages.

First contact: The moon's shadow becomes visible over the sun's disc. The sun looks as if a bite has been taken from it.

Second contact: Almost the entire sun is covered by the moon. The last of the sun's light leaks into the gaps between the moon's craters, making the overlying planets look like a diamond ring.

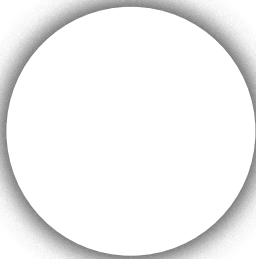
Totality: The moon completely covers the sun. This is the most dramatic and eerie stage of a total solar eclipse. The sky darkens, temperatures fall and birds and animals often go quiet.

Third contact: The moon's shadow starts moving away and the sun reappears.

Fourth contact: The moon stops overlapping the sun. The eclipse is over.









We stand side by side in front of the speckled mirror. Our reflections avoid eye contact. Like me, she's wearing black and like mine, her clothes have clearly been chosen with care and respect. Neither of us is on trial, or not officially, but we both know that in cases like this, it's always the woman who is judged.

The cubicles behind us are empty, the doors ajar. This counts as privacy in court. The witness box is not the only place where you need to watch every word.

I clear my throat and the sound bounces off the tiled walls, which replicate the perfect acoustics of the lobby in miniature. Everything echoes here. The corridors ring with the institutional clatter of doors opening and closing, case files too heavy to carry wheeled around on squeaking trolleys. High ceilings catch your words and throw them back in different shapes.

Court, with its sweeping spaces and oversized rooms, plays tricks of scale. It's deliberate, designed to remind you of your own insignificance in relation to the might of the criminal justice machine, to dampen down the dangerous, glowing power of the sworn spoken word.

Time and money are distorted, too. Justice swallows gold; to secure a man's liberty costs of tens of thousands of pounds. In the public gallery, Sally Balcombe wears jewellery worth the price of

a small London flat. Even the leather on the judge's chair stinks of money. You can almost smell it from here.

But the toilets, as everywhere, are great levellers. Here in the ladies' lavatory the flush is still broken and the dispenser has still run out of soap, and the locks on the doors still don't work properly. Inefficient cisterns dribble noisily, making discreet speech impossible. If I wanted to say anything, I'd have to shout.

In the mirror, I look her up and down. Her shift dress hides her curves. I've got my hair, the bright long hair that was the first thing Kit loved about me, the hair that he said he could see in the dark, pulled into a schoolmarm's bun at the nape of my neck. We both look . . . demure, I suppose is the word, although no one has ever described me that way before. We are unrecognisable as the girls from the festival: the girls who painted our bodies and faces gold to whirl and howl under the moon. Those girls are gone, both dead in their different ways.

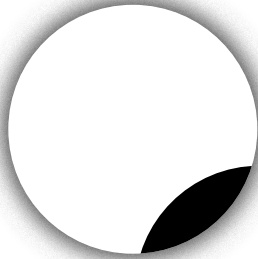
A heavy door slams outside, making us both jump. She's as nervous as I am, I realise. At last our reflections lock eyes, each silently asking the other the questions too big – too dangerous – to voice.

How did it come to this?

How did we get here?

How will it end?

# First Contact





# I



LAURA

18 March 2015

London is the most light-polluted city in Britain, but even here in the northern suburbs, you can still see the stars at four o'clock in the morning. The lights are off in our attic study, and I don't need Kit's telescope to see Venus; a crescent moon wears the pale blue planet like an earring.

The city is at my back; the view from here is over suburban rooftops and dominated by Alexandra Palace. By day it's a Victorian monstrosity of cast iron, brick and glass, but in the small hours it's a spike in the sky, its radio mast tipped with a glowing red dot. A night bus of the same colour sweeps through the otherwise empty park road. This part of London has a truer 24-hour culture than the West End. No sooner does the last Turkish kebab shop shut than the Polish bakery takes its first delivery. I didn't choose to live here, but I love it now. There is anonymity in bustle.

Two aeroplanes blink across each other's paths. One floor below me, Kit is deep in sleep. He's the one going away, yet I'm wide awake with pre-trip nerves. It is a long time since I slept through the night but my wakefulness now has nothing to do with the babies in my belly who tapdance on my bladder and kick me awake. Kit once described real life as the boring bit between eclipses but I think of it as the safe time. Beth has crossed the

world to find us twice. We are only visible when we travel. A couple of years ago, I hired a private detective and challenged him to find us using only the paper trail of our previous lives. He couldn't trace us. And if he couldn't do it, then no one else can. Certainly not Beth, and not even a man of Jamie's resources. It has been fourteen years since one of his letters found me.

This total eclipse will be the first Kit has seen without me since he was a teenager. Even the eclipses he had to miss, he missed with me, because of me. It's not a good idea to travel in my condition, and I'm so grateful to be in this condition that I don't begrudge missing the experience, although I am terrified for Kit. Beth knows me. She knows *us*. She knows that to hurt him is to destroy me.

I watch the moon set in its slow arc. Following its course is a deliberate act of mindfulness, the living-in-the-moment therapy that is supposed to stop my panic attacks before they can take hold. The telltale early symptom is there; a subtle standing-to-attention of all the tiny hairs on my skin, a feeling that someone's trailing a gossamer scarf over my forearms. They call it somatising, a physical manifestation of psychological damage. Mindfulness is supposed to help me separate the soma from the psyche. I play join-the-dots with the constellations. There is Orion, one of the few constellations everyone can identify, and, flung a little to the north, the Seven Sisters that give the nearby neighbourhood its name.

I rock back and forth from the heels to the balls of my feet, concentrating on the carpet fibres under my bare toes. I can't let Kit see me anxious. In the short term, it would ruin his trip, and after that, he would suggest more psychotherapy, and I've taken that as far as I can. There's only so far you can get when you're holding on to a secret like mine. The psychotherapists always say that the sessions are confidential, like their Ikea couch is a sacred confessional. But my confession is a broken law, and I can't trust anyone with it. There is no statute of limitations for what I did in this country, and none in my heart.



When my breathing evens out, I turn away from the window. There is just enough light to see Kit's map. Not the original of course, that was destroyed, but a painstaking recreation of it. It's a huge relief map of the world, crisscrossed with curves of red and golden thread, measured to the nearest millimetre, glued down with characteristic precision. The gold arcs mark the eclipses he has already seen; the red those we can expect to see in our lifetimes. Part of the ritual is coming home after a trip to replace red threads with gold. (Being Kit, he has calculated his life expectancy using family history, lifestyle and longevity trends, and allowed for infirmity curtailing travel when he's ninety. So we should see our last eclipse in 2066.)

Years ago, Beth trailed her fingers over the first map and that's when I told her about our plans.

I wonder where on the planet she is now. Sometimes I wonder if she's even still alive. I have never wished her dead – for all that she put us through, she was a victim too – but I have often wished that she could be . . . deleted, I suppose, is the right word. There's no way of finding out. Try to look up 'Elizabeth Taylor' and see how far you get without the actor or the novelist making a nonsense of your search. Using the diminutive 'Beth' does little to narrow it down. She seems to have vanished as effectively as we have.

I haven't looked Jamie up for years. It's too uncomfortable, after my part in it all. His public relations crusade paid off and these days when you search his name the crime comes up but only in his preferred context. The first few hits are about his campaigning work, the support he gives to wrongly accused men and rightly accused men too, calling for anonymity up to the point of conviction. I can never get beyond the first few lines before I start to feel sick. I still need to keep myself informed, so I got around the problem by setting up a Google alert that links his name to the only word that matters. There's no point combining his name with Beth's in a search; her lifelong anonymity is guaranteed. That's the law whatever the outcome of this kind of trial. I

suppose she was lucky – we all were, in a way – that the case predated social media and the keyboard vigilantes whose blood sport is identification.

Light on the landing tells me Kit's awake. I take a deep breath in and a longer breath out and I am calm. I have beaten this attack. I roll up the sleeves of the sweater I'm wearing. It's Kit's, and it doesn't do me any favours, but it fits and I seem to have been at the stage where I dress for comfort for years now. Even before I conceived, the steroids gave me hips and breasts for the first time in my life, and I still haven't worked out how to dress around curves.

I pad down the stairs, edging past the flat-packed cots on the landing. When Kit comes home we'll have to convert Juno and Piper's room at the back of the house into a nursery. Superstition, a reluctance to do anything until he has survived this trip, has held me back.

I find him sitting up in bed, already checking his phone for the weather report, his pale copper hair at mad angles. The words *don't go* try to punch their way out of my mouth. Knowing he would stay if I asked him to is all the reason I need to let him leave.

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