



HE KIDNAPPED HER  
TEN YEARS AGO.  
NOW SHE'S  
IN CONTROL...

# RELEASE

'Addictive and  
provocative.'  
LORAIN PECK

'Gripping and  
totally twisted.'  
CHRISTIAN WHITE

LUCY CHRISTOPHER

AUTHOR OF *STOLEN*

December 27th

A letter arrives through the slot with a snap.

I lift my head from the couch. Even from up the stairs, above the bakery, I always hear the mail come. I see the half-finished bottle of whisky on a cushion beside me, then look across to see that the cupboard—*your* cupboard—is still closed. If that doesn't deserve half a bottle of whisky, I don't know what does. Soon it will be a new year and I can't take you with me.

I say this every year.

And every year you come anyway.

If I could find the part of my brain where you hitchhike, maybe then the therapy would work. But, who knows, this year might be different. I check the time: half past nine, the post is early. My head is thumping as if there are a hundred hammers in there. In the cab on the way back from Mum's last night, I watched the Christmas lights go off one by one, as I tried not to be sick on the back seat. I have nothing else to do today but recover from a hangover. I'm not rostered on at the travel agency, even though I told them I could work over the Christmas sale period.

My phone beeps.

Nick. Of course.

You feel OK this morn? ;) x

Christ. What did I send him? I check through the messages from last night: several about wanting to see him. Then I went quiet. What I always do. Today I reply; it's the least he deserves.

Yeah, thanks. Went straight to bed. We should catch up soon.

Do I mean that?

I'm not sure.

I'm also not sure whether to put a kiss after my words. My fingers stay frozen. Was it you who took away my ability to decide on anything? God knows I've had a thousand sessions with Rhiannon, my therapist, but it never gets any better. Your fault. Whenever something goes wrong, it's easier to put your name on it. It's almost fun to blame you when the boiler breaks down, or the tube's delayed, or I get food poisoning...or drunk.

I shut my eyes and press send, without an x, and then feel sick about that too. I'm pushing him away, just like Mum says I do with everyone. True to form, I don't answer the messages from Anna and Neri, both asking about my plans for New Year's Eve.

I pad downstairs, feeling sorry for the postman who has to work the day after Boxing Day.

Another beep.

Catch up tomorrow? x

Nick's never dissuaded. I don't get that. I would be. I feel guilty, so I add:

Sure. Few drinks?

Still no kiss.

I bend down to the doormat and pick up a leaflet about a new dry-cleaning service on the high street, something from a political party, and then—



I'm not thinking anymore about Nick.

Under the leaflets, there is a letter. I stare at it as if it's alive and might bite. I'm suddenly anxious as hell, worse than I've been for months. This isn't a bill, or a late Christmas card. The envelope is too white, too official. And a part of me is not surprised to see it.

I'm surprised by that.

*Get a hold of yourself.* I say it out loud, pleased by the boldness in my voice. Then, I reach out and turn over the envelope.

The name above the address is my old name.

My dead name.

I carry the letter upstairs, between my fingertips, put it on the kitchen table and sit in a chair facing it. Perhaps someone else should do it—Mum, maybe. Someone else should know what's inside before I do. Once it's open, things will change; I'll have to decide how I feel, what I do...who I tell. There'll be other decisions, too: whether to see Rhiannon, or drink, or go to the cupboard. Decisions make me feel stressed. And when I feel stressed, I spiral. It's enough now that I'm not running screaming into the street. I can sit with this. I can breathe. A voice inside me says I should call Nick—that this is what he's for—but I can't. Then he might be the one who ends up running screaming into the street.

I stare at that name, so clear in black print, as if that old part of me is living here today, despite everything. I should have told the prison registrar about the name change, should have known this would happen, one day.

Eventually, I bring the letter to my lap. It isn't heavy, it doesn't tick. The postmark on the envelope is dated two weeks ago, but the post is always slow from Perth. There is a symbol

stamped in one corner; I could engrave it into my skin without looking—the crest for the Western Australian Department of Corrective Services, the department now considering your release.

I know what this letter will say. It's almost a relief.

Almost.

I'm shaking so hard I shut my eyes and grasp the arms of the chair. This could be a new kind of sentence. I rest the letter against the cyclamen on the table and try to breathe deeply; it's what Rhiannon would advise. Then I lurch from the table, stumble to the window, pull the curtains, open the latch. *Breathe*. The air is so cold it makes my teeth sting.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

I clench my fingers into a fist and imagine pushing a knife. Your blood on my skin, sticky and hot.

You falling  
down  
before me.

I exhale and look out. The hazy glow of Christmas lights. Scrunched newspaper tumbling down slick pavements. A black cab turning its lights off as it speeds by below. For a moment, there's a sweet-soft numbness in the air, before the roar of the monster city comes back and I am hit by the stench of the drains. I make myself say it: *North East London. Barkingside*.

Nowhere to you.

One bed, a bathroom, a kitchen and a living room. Above the bakery. Why it's hot every morning.

It was only a few months ago when I filled in the victim submission form, when I answered those impossible questions about what impact an early release might have, the potential for contact, the conditions I wanted the board to consider. Surely it's too early for your parole? Maybe you've changed, and the letter will tell me about your good behaviour. Maybe you've changed more than I have.

I place my forehead against the window. A Christmas tree illuminates a front porch. Sal, my resident fox, slinks behind the bins, and the sickly sun begins to creep above the rooftops. I wipe my breath from the glass and watch Sal's fire-bright fur appear near the bus stop, her tail twitching in the nettles beside the alleyway. I see you when I move my gaze: you weave down the high street in a trench coat, your hair slicked back. I blink you away. But you slip inside a man dressed in overalls turning down Pinter Street. Then you're a guy leading a child towards McDonald's. You are the local chemist, unlocking your shop, sorting out my prescriptions for happy pills and painkillers.

You are everywhere. Still.

I bring my fingers to my neck and press until I cough, which makes me feel a little better, and now the glass is fogged up again, so I can't see you. I swallow and it hurts and it's satisfying. Not that I'd tell that to Rhiannon. When I shut the window and brush the crumbling paint on the sill, I feel the dry ridge of your scar against my skin. Even now, I can conjure you into my fingertips; you arrive like a trick.

I try to be logical and contain your presence with numbers. Nine years, nine months since I last saw you, handcuffed, your head down. And longer since my lips brushed yours and I tasted salt. Your sentence was twelve years. More than I thought you'd

get at the time. Not enough now. But there's that thing called parole, good behaviour, and you always were a charmer.

I move away from the window. I need water, so do the ferns. I sprinkle the watering can over them on my way past and check the soil around the chilli plants. I whisper sweet nothings to the mint to help her grow. The holidays are always the worst, and coping strategies are so much harder. But I'd been doing well!

One glass of water, then another, then into the shower. I scrub hard. You're still inside me, like the grains of sand stuck in my boots—the boots in the cupboard in the living room. If I took them out, could I still smell the desert? I turn the hot tap on harder and blast you away. I gasp water and spit you out, down the drain. *Gone!* But if I shut my eyes, you could be right with me.

I don't look at the letter on the table.

I don't go to the cupboard.

I want to scream.

Instead, I put on the Christmas jumper Mum made me wear yesterday and the day before, and go into the kitchen, where I discover I've run out of milk and coffee. There is nothing apart from cat biscuits and the leftovers Mum packaged up for me. I tip some of both into a bowl for Sal.

Out the kitchen window, her glinting amber eyes stare back from under the bakery's old storage shed. She watches me as I step down the fire-escape stairs and crouch a couple of metres from her.

'No milk today,' I say.

Her nose wrinkles as she sniffs first, before sliding out, her body flat to the frozen ground. In summer, when she was little

more than a cub, she let me feed her from my hand. But now, as a winter adult, she is wary and withdrawn. I tell myself this is what happens with wild things, but the feeling of being abandoned by her still stings. Delicately, she takes a piece of turkey from the bowl with her neat, sharp teeth. She looks thinner today, though still beautiful: a flash of bright copper in this forgotten courtyard.

‘There’s a letter,’ I tell her.

One of her ears twitches. Perhaps this is the day she’ll reply to me. She’ll tell me to treat you with the same disdain she’d treat a male fox, with angry calls and bites. She’ll tell me to ignore you. I shift my weight from one ankle to the other as I consider her.

‘It’s not that simple,’ I say.

She curls her lip, flinching from my words, then crunches the last cat biscuit and goes back under the shed. I long to touch her—to feel warmth and softness in this freezing air, to have flames at my fingertips—but I won’t dare. Now she’s all grown, I’m not sure she’ll ever let me touch her again. I grab a discarded bit of roast potato and throw it in her direction, but she stays hidden. I pick up the bowl, go back inside and stand motionless in the kitchen for what feels like forever. Nick messages again and I ignore it.

Finally, I head to the mini mart. Milk, coffee, bread, tinned tuna, whisky, Hobnobs and cat biscuits: my standard haul for a few days. Eddie waves a hand above his wife’s samosas, as he does every time, but I shake my head. They say people who eat less live longer. Do I want to live longer?

On a bench in East Park, shopping bag on my lap, I look for the park pack, inspecting the huge laurel hedge behind



the swings where I know their den is. There are starlings and pigeons and even a small mouse, but no foxes. I leave cat biscuits anyway; it's too cold for hunting.

You're still creeping in, I feel you there, at the edges of me. It would be so easy to let you take over. I should have stayed at Mum's another day, should've met Nick or Anna in the city instead of coming home. I shut my eyes and concentrate on sirens a few streets away, on a man shouting down his mobile phone, on cars on the high street. You told me once how the land is waiting, underneath and around the city, always ready to return. I imagine the earth under the flashing lights and throbbing pavements. I remember. Even in Barkingside, even now.

I read Nick's last message.

We could have dinner tomorrow, not just a drink. My treat x

Why does he try so hard? I don't deserve him. Here is a nice boy doing all the nice things. I flick through more messages from Anna and Neri, and other half-forgotten friends from a lifetime ago, all wanting me to be *merry* and to have a *happy new year*. I still can't answer any of them. Today, I can't lie.

Back in the flat, I sit on the couch. No more text messages, no knocks on the door, nothing on TV but smiles and sparkle. I am a statue, still as desert rocks. I am all alone.

I look across at the letter.

Not yet.

I can't do it yet.

So I take the whisky bottle and make myself forget.



In my dreams of your release, you're older, of course, and thinner, but there is still the same shine in your eyes, blue as the desert sky, the same shirt, and the scar.

Outside the grey, high wall, you go still, like one of my foxes. You stand smelling the air, watching the birds, checking that the world is as you left it. Your fingers twitch as if they want to hold something. Someone.

You are the same.

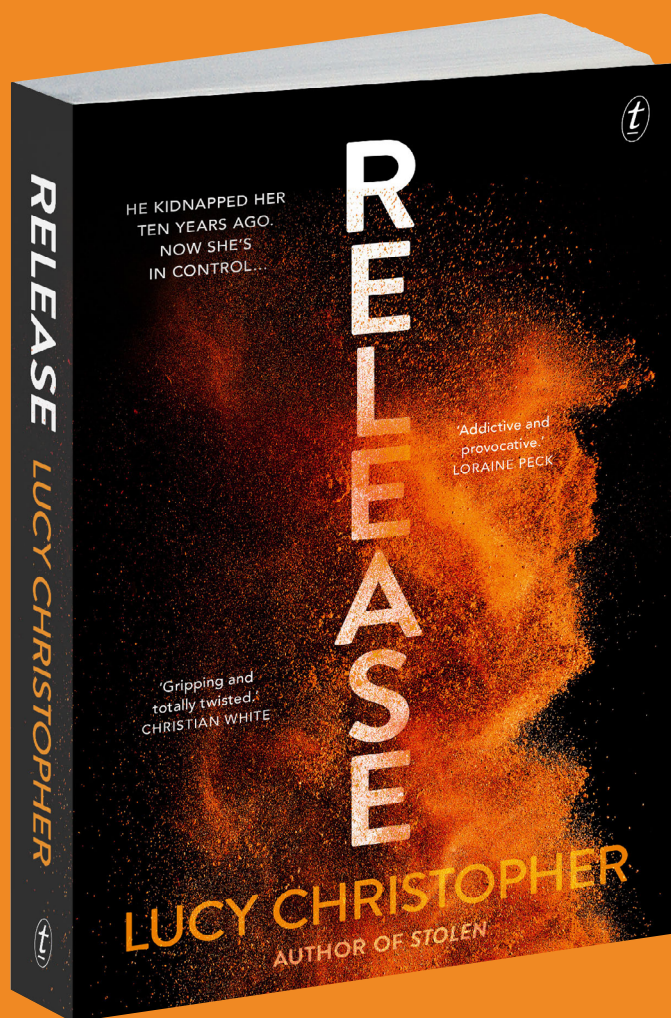
You are *exactly* the same.

I wind down my car window and hang my head out like a dog, panting and eager, but you don't see me. Not yet. There is a knife on my thigh, and the steel catches the light, makes me blink. I could blind you with it. Someone has given you shoes, new and gleaming; like you are now.

When you finally walk, you move fast. I shove the car door open, no time to close it behind me if I'm going to catch you. You don't look back, although you must hear the slap of my shoes on the tarmac. Maybe you want it, this release I'm about to give you. This pain.

But when I reach you, I stop. I don't stab. I drop the knife and I reach out to touch you. Finally.

And that's when you turn around.



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