

## PRAISE FOR ELENA FORBES AND *DIE WITH ME*

“*Die With Me* may be the first book by Elena Forbes, but she already writes like a seasoned pro. Deftly plotted, carefully nuanced, and compulsively readable, Forbes combines the best elements of a police procedural and a psychological thriller into a chilling portrait of a monstrous killer. Elena Forbes is a fresh new voice in a crowded field and *Die With Me* is a stellar debut. We will hear much more from this talented writer. Highly recommended.”

— Sheldon Siegel, *New York Times*  
bestselling author of *The Confession*

“Dark, chilling, and clever, *Die With Me* is a classic whodunit. With her gripping, textured plot, complex characters, and fascinating procedural details — all playing out on the moody streets of London — Elena Forbes bursts on the crime fiction scene with a fantastic debut. This is a sophisticated, intelligent novel bound to keep you up past your bedtime.”

— Lisa Unger, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Beautiful Lies* and *Sliver of Truth*

“*Die With Me* delivers. This brilliantly crafted British cop novel features a fascinating investigator and a nasty killer . . . A fine novel . . . Forbes is already at work on a sequel, and that’s good news.”

— *Globe and Mail*

“Elena Forbes introduces an interesting new London homicide detective . . . A stellar debut.”

— *Ottawa Sun*

“. . . a fresh and intelligent first crime novel . . . Forbes is particularly clever at pushing her characters in unexpected directions. . . . It comes as good news that a development at the book’s end guarantees a sequel to *Die With Me*.”

— *Toronto Star*

“Forbes, a former investment banker, renders crisp prose, a clever plot, and an unsettling portrait of a charismatic psychopath. She is definitely one to watch.”

— *Booklist* (starred review)

“Forbes has written an engrossing police procedural that fans of Jill McGown and Ian Rankin will place on their reserve list. Highly recommended.” — *Library Journal* (starred review)

“Elena Forbes has written a fine debut novel . . . The troubled [DI Mark] Tartaglia is an interesting creation, and the plot shifts and swerves in unexpected but pleasurable ways.”

— *The Observer*

“This is a fast-moving novel, in which Forbes offers an original and compelling portrait of a murderer.” — *Sunday Times*

“. . . [an] entertaining debut . . . an intelligently plotted, convincing, and nicely textured read. One hopes to see more of the appealing cast of well-characterized police personnel in a sequel.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“An impressive first-timer . . . Forbes is good on plot, tension, and lurking evil. The killer is clever and frighteningly normal.”

— *The Times*

“A very well-written, cleverly plotted first novel.”

— *Literary Review*

“. . . beautifully-layered book . . . Fans of Inspector Banks or Adam Dalgliesh will embrace this accomplished debut.”

— *Mystery Scene Magazine*

# DIE WITH ME

ELENA  
FORBES

a **MARK TARTAGLIA** Mystery



SPIDERLINE

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*For Clio and Louis*



The tombstone was nearly six feet tall, weathered and mottled with lichen. A pair of fat-cheeked cherubs framed the inscription: 'How short is life, how soon comes death.' Soon comes death. So very true. She was late, his bride, his partner 'til death do us part. More than ten bloody minutes late, he noticed, checking his watch yet again. Had she no sense of occasion? Didn't she care that he was standing there in the cold, waiting for her? Soon it would be dark. People would start leaving work to go home and they would miss their chance.

He glanced towards the entrance to the churchyard, his breath a pale cloud blown away by the wind. Still nothing. Stamping his feet hard on a horizontal grave slab for warmth, hands jammed deep in the pockets of his overcoat, he backed into the recess of the church porch. For ceremony's sake he had thought of pinning a flower in his buttonhole but had decided against it. Too noticeable. Besides, he hated flowers.

Where the hell was she? Maybe she had never meant to come. Maybe she had just been stringing him along all the time. Digging his nails into his palms at the thought, he jerked his head over his shoulder and spat on the ground, imagining what he would do

to her if she stood him up. Telling himself not to worry, he examined the thick skeins of cobwebs that stretched like gauze between the pillars of the porch, focusing on a fat, dead fly imprisoned in the sticky mesh. She'd be here. She had to come. She wouldn't dare let him down.

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and swung round to face the road. Framed by the wrought iron archway at the end of the path, she stood at the top of the steps looking up towards him, eyes startled. Her white face, curtained by long waves of hair, seemed like a full moon, featureless. Sweat pricked his palms and a swell of excitement swept over him, tingling down his back, making the hairs on his neck stand on end. He exhaled sharply. Moistening his lips with his tongue, he smoothed down his hair with his fingers, watching as she came through the gate and walked towards him up the path. Her movements were jerky, like a little bird, nervous, hesitating, never taking her eyes off him. She was younger than he had imagined, no more than fourteen or fifteen. His maiden, his bride. She was perfect. The breath caught in his throat and he was unable to speak.

Dressed in nothing but black, as he had insisted, she was wearing an old raincoat, several sizes too large, that looked as though it had been borrowed or bought in a second-hand shop. Beneath it peeped the uneven fringe of a long skirt and heavy boots with a strap and silver buckle at the ankle. He noticed all the details, pleased that she had done as she was told.

She stopped a few feet away as if unsure, peering short-sightedly at him. 'Are you Tom?'

Her voice was pitched high, her enunciation child-like. He detected a slight accent but couldn't place it. Trying to contain his excitement, he stepped out of the shadows and smiled, reaching out his arm to welcome her.

'Gemma.'

Trembling, tentative, she offered him a small hand from beneath the rolled-up coat sleeve. Her fingers were icy and limp as he pressed them briefly to his lips. As he touched her skin, he caught the faint smell of Pears soap, kindling old, unpleasant memories. He let her hand drop a little too quickly and she looked away, embarrassed, folding her arms tightly and hugging herself. Gently, he took her by the elbow and pulled her towards him.

'Dear Gemma. You're so beautiful, you know. Much more than I'd imagined. Much, much more. So very beautiful.'

Still gazing at her feet, she flushed, giving a shy wriggle of pleasure. No doubt it was the first time anyone had ever said those words to her.

'You're sure you want to do this?' he said.

She glanced up at him, her pale-lashed eyes searching his face, looking for reassurance, maybe, or something else. Did she like what she saw? Did she find him handsome? Of course she did. He could see it in her eyes. He was everything she had hoped for, and more. He had filled her dreams for so long and now here he was, Prince Charming, standing in front of her, flesh and blood.

*On a hot summer's night, would you offer your throat to the wolf with the red roses? Why did that*

bloody song keep popping up in his mind? *Will he offer me his mouth? Yes. Will he offer me his teeth? Yes. Will he offer me his jaws? Yes. Will he offer me his hunger? Yes. And will he starve without me? Yes.* The hunger. The yearning. So difficult to control. *And does he love me? Yes.* He had said that he loved her.

He bent down to kiss her properly. Again that foul whiff of Pears. Had she scrubbed herself all over with it? He tried to block it out, watching as she gave a little sigh, screwing her eyelids tight shut as she yielded, her lips in a tight moue, like a child's kiss. He was surprised at her inexperience. Most girls her age were little better than whores.

He kissed her again, allowing his lips to linger for a moment, touching her mouth ever so lightly with his tongue, feeling her soften beneath his grasp as he observed her, the un-plucked eyebrows, the fine golden down on her cheeks, the faded dusting of freckles on her nose. The winter light bleached the colour from her face, giving her a deathly pallor. He was sure she was a virgin, although that had no special appeal for him.

After what he considered to be long enough, he stepped back and she opened her eyes. They were a clear blue, without doubt her best feature. Trusting eyes, soft and innocent. She really was perfect. He smiled at his good fortune, showing her his beautiful white teeth.

'You're really sure? You're not just wasting my time?'

She looked away as if his gaze burnt her, fingers fiddling with a thread hanging from the end of her coat sleeve.

‘I’m serious about this, you know,’ he said, watching her closely. ‘You’re not going to let me down?’

She shook her head slowly but he was unconvinced. He touched her lightly under the chin, making her look up at him again.

‘Come on. We’re in this together. *Together, forever, you and I.*’

The words came from another song but it was the sort of trite thing she liked. Easily pleased, she had lapped up the poetry he had sent her, all about love and about death. It seemed to touch a chord, opening a floodgate of confession and neediness. The pain, the loneliness, the sad catalogue of neglect and unhappiness. He understood her so well. He was her soul mate, her first and only love.

‘Us. Together. Never parted. It’s what you wanted, isn’t it? It’s what you said.’ He stared at her, trying to inject warmth into his expression, trying to tamp down his impatience. ‘We don’t belong in this world. You know it’s the only way.’

Gulping, she nodded slowly, tears welling.

‘Good. I’ve got everything we need in here.’ He patted his rucksack and swung it over his shoulder. Bending forward, he kissed her quickly again. ‘Come, my darling. It’s time.’ Clamping an arm around her, he marched her into the dimly-lit interior of the church.

The air was stale; damp mingling with the stench of rotting flowers from various stands of wilted white roses and chrysanthemums placed at intervals along the aisle. He couldn’t imagine why anyone would choose this church to be married in. There was no atmosphere, nothing remarkable about the bare, cav-

ernous interior with its marble plaques, war memorials and anonymous rows of brown pews, nothing to attract tourists or other casual visitors. It was a neglected place, unloved and unfrequented. Security was also extraordinarily absent, although there was nothing worth taking. He had done his research and chosen it carefully. Weekday mid-afternoons were a void time, perfect for what lay ahead.

Gemma stood transfixed, gazing up at the round stained-glass window at the end of the nave above the altar, its jewel colours illuminated by the dim light from outside. The martyrdom of St Sebastian, early nineteenth century, he remembered reading in the church pamphlet. St Catherine or St Joan would have been a more appropriate backdrop but female martyrs were thin on the ground in London.

He jerked her by the elbow. ‘Come on. Someone could come along any minute and we can’t risk being disturbed.’

She allowed herself to be propelled towards the heavy-curtained archway near the pulpit. Behind was a long flight of stairs leading to the organ and the empty gallery high above the nave. As he pulled back the curtain, she stopped and peered up into the dark area above.

‘It’s so high,’ she said, drawing out the word ‘high’ as if it were something shocking.

He knew he was going to have trouble. He wanted to say that ‘high’ was the whole point, as she damn well knew. ‘High’ was what it was all about. They’d discussed everything at length. Now was not the time for doubts. For a moment, he pictured her wheeling

above him, spinning through the air, her black raincoat fanning out behind her like the wings of a huge crow. He could hear the sound of it flapping and he felt almost feverish.

‘Come on, I’m with you. Just a little further now.’ He took hold of her wrist and started to drag her up the first flight of stairs.

She tried to pull her arm away. ‘You’re hurting me.’

He caught the puzzled look in her eyes and let go. ‘Sorry, my darling. I’m just feeling nervous, that’s all. I’ve waited so long for this. For you. I’ll follow you, shall I?’

He watched as she stumbled up the stairs. At the top, she wavered, then collapsed in a heap on the landing. Putting her head in her hands, she bent over double, her hair falling over her face and down her legs like a sleek, brown cloak. Half choking, she started to sob.

Shit. This was all he needed. Even though the sound was muffled, somebody might hear. He wanted to jam his hand over her mouth but he mustn’t alarm her. He knelt down on the stair below her, holding her knees, which were clamped tightly together. He would do anything if it would only make her shut up. Slowly, he started to massage her thighs through the thick woollen layers of her skirt.

‘It’s going to be OK. If you don’t want to do it, we don’t have to.’ He cupped his hands around her head and kissed her hair over and over again, feeling almost high with worry. ‘Please stop crying. Really, it’s OK. I’m just so glad I met you.’ If only she would look at him, he was sure he could win her around. ‘We don’t

have to do it. We don't have to, you know.' He took her tiny hands in his and peeled them away from her face, forcing her to raise her head, eyes still tight shut. 'Look at me, Gemma. We'll do whatever you want. Really... I mean that. I love you.'

Slowly she opened her eyes and he rewarded her with one of his softest smiles, brushing her wet, sticky hair off her face, using the edge of her coat sleeve to wipe away the slime around her nose and lips.

'I don't want to,' she whispered, trembling as she gazed at him. 'I don't want to...' She couldn't finish the sentence. Die. Die with me. Be mine forever. That's what he had said.

He rose, went over to her and sat down on the step beside her. Wrapping his arm tightly around her, he pulled her into him, cradling her head against his shoulder.

'Nor do I, my darling, nor do I.' Stroking her soft hair, he kissed the top of her head. 'Not now I've met you, anyway. Do you feel that too?'

She nodded, pressing her head hard into his coat sleeve.

'You've saved me, you know. You're so very special. My little Gemma. Shall we do the ceremony anyway? I have everything ready. Shall we exchange rings as we planned?' She gave a squeak of assent, burying deep into him, nuzzling his shoulder like a kitten. 'Very special,' he said, still stroking her hair, trying to soothe her. 'So very special.'

She started as if stung by something, her hand flying to her mouth as she looked up at him.

'What's the matter?'

‘The note. I left a note like you told me. What happens when Mum finds it?’

Was that all? He smiled with relief. ‘Don’t worry. We can either get it back or...’ he let the sentence hang before continuing, ‘you can come and stay with me. Then it won’t matter. You don’t have to go home, if you don’t want to. There’s no way they’ll find us. No way at all.’

She blushed, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye as she returned the smile. For a moment, in spite of her swollen eyes and blotchy face, she looked almost pretty.

‘Come on then. I think you’ll like the gallery. It’s very private, a really special place. Nobody will bother us there.’

He stood up and helped her to her feet, patting down the folds of her coat and brushing away the dust and fluff from the floor. Barely able to contain himself, he took her by the hand and kissed it one last time, closing his eyes briefly as he pictured again what was to come. She was his. All his. He was sure.