

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J.T. ELLISON

TEAR



TIME

EVERYONE HAS A DARK SIDE

APART

A NOVEL

# TEAR ME APART

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J.T. ELLISON



TEAR ME APART

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*J.T. Ellison*

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## PROLOGUE

*University Hospital  
Nashville, Tennessee  
1993  
Vivian*

I REMEMBER the day she arrived so clearly. What quirk of fate led her to me? I wondered about this for years. If only I had stepped right instead of left at the corner, or taken the stairs instead of the elevator at the hospital, perhaps ordered chicken instead of steak for my last meal with my father before his death, the principles of chaos—the butterfly effect—would have altered the course of my life enough that she wouldn't have appeared. But I did step right, and I took the elevator, and I had the steak, and she did appear, and I will never recover from her.

\* \* \*

It's my eighth Turkey Tetrazzini Tuesday. I push the food around

on my tray, not hungry. The meds they give me make me in turns nauseous and lacking in appetite and dinner is at five, anyway, only a few hours away. If I feel better then, I'll eat.

Everyone else is happily communing with the glob of gray matter on their plates. They don't know any better. Half are drooling in their trays, the other half are tracing the voyage of little green men through the gravy or wadding the tinfoil wrapping from their rolls into bouquets they hang on their bedsteads to keep away the government spies. Suffice it to say we don't have anything common. I have no exciting diagnosis. I haven't committed a crime. I'm just depressed. Like, suicidal ideation with three attempts under my belt depressed. Yes, it's the bad kind.

I wander back to my room, glancing in the doors of the rest of the ward. Occasionally, the occupants leave out fun things to play with. Magazines. String. Cards. I'm not picky, anything to break the tedium. I'm out of luck today. The rooms are spotless. Beds are made, towels hang straight and even, the whole ward smells of Pine-Sol. The janitors have been through. They will have pocketed anything of worth.

I bail on the reconnaissance mission and swing by my small hole for my cigarettes. Four times a day, I am allowed to stand in a tiny six-by-six hutch off the back steps and smoke. I can see the sky and the huge brass padlock that, if opened, would give me my freedom, allow me to step into the parking lot and disappear into the world, but nothing else. Sometimes, I wonder if cigarette privileges are worth it. It must be how cows feel, penned in day after day, never able to cross to the other field.

My room, 8A, is white. White as week-old snow, the kind of white that isn't crisp and clean, but dirtied, institutional. You won't see the exact shade anywhere else. White walls, white bedding, white linoleum. White gowns. White long-sleeved jackets with shiny silver buckles if we're naughty.

Normally, we're all double-bunked, but I haven't shared in a month, not since the last roommate was sent home. As much as I hate her for getting out, I've found I enjoy the silence of having my

own space. Being alone always frightened me before. I despised the dark and its creeping pulchritude. Now, I crave its simplicity. Its emptiness and solitude. Caring about fear is too hard anymore.

I stop in the doorway. There is someone in my room.

Her hair is dark and cascading, freshly washed; she reeks of the squeaky-clean scent of Johnson's Baby Shampoo. The hospital passes it out to all new inductees in their plastic "welcome" bucket.

She sits on the bed, head cocked to the side, her back to the door, staring out the four-by-two wire mesh screen window, which looks at the parking lot—bleak gray asphalt and a never-ending parade of cars. It's a strange torture, this taste of freedom they give us. We are fish in the aquarium; we can see the rest of the world passing by, disinterested people living uninteresting lives.

This intrusion into my private space infuriates me, and I slam back out to the nurses' station. There is a nurse named Eleanor Snow who runs the ward, but we all call her Ratchet because she is a bitch. No one said we had to be original.

Ratchet is calmly doing an intake form. Probably for my new roommate. Her serenity infuriates me further. I don't get serenity. My mind never quiets and allows me to sit, smiling, as I fill in forms.

I snarl at her, "Who is in my room?"

"Your new roommate. I suggest you go introduce yourself. And keep your hands to yourself. You don't want me to cut your nails again."

I shudder. I don't, and she knows it.

"You didn't ask my permission to move someone in."

"We don't have to. Now scat. I have work to do. And eat your dinner, or I'll talk with Dr. Freeman about your lack of eating."

"Be sure to tell him the meds he gives me make me puke."

I storm off. It's the only power I have, not eating. They force the drugs in me, tell me when to sleep, shower, and shit; make me sit in a circle with the other drooling idiots to share my story—*you'll feel so much better after you've talked it out, dear*. No. No!

To hell with the cigarette break. I head back to 8A, and the girl



is still sitting in the same spot, her head cocked the same way. She has long hands. They prop her up, to the sides of her hips, as if they are grounding her to the world.

I make noise, and she doesn't turn. I step in front of the window, looming over her so she'll look at me. I snap my fingers under her nose, and she barely flinches.

Oh.

It doesn't take a brain surgeon to diagnose her silence and lack of movement. She's riding with King Thor. Thorazine for the uninitiated. A strong antipsychotic agent overused in mental facilities to keep rowdy, disturbed, or otherwise uncooperative patients calm.

I like riding with the King even less than having Ratchet snip my nails, so I cut the stranger some slack. I rifle through her things. Her few clothes are wadded in the bottom of the laundry bag, and she wears the same baggy sweats and sweatshirt I currently model because my civvies are in the laundry. The rest of the bag has small toiletries, a hospital-issued toothbrush and toothpaste, a comb. She isn't a voluntary.

Voluntary commitment, when the patient agrees to come in for a certain amount of time to get their head shrunk. Technically, I am a voluntary, which is why I have a few more privileges than most. I've also been here for a little over two months, and I am ready as fuck to get out of here. What they don't like to tell you is when you go in *voluntarily*, you don't get the choice to *voluntarily* leave. No, that's up to them, to Dr. Freakazoid and Ratchet and the "treatment team."

Bastards.

I quickly search the rest of the room and see she only has the clothes on her back and in her bag. Interesting. A non-voluntary could be a nice diversion. When she comes back from her ride, I might find she's a mumbling, drooling idiot, or a tinfoil baby, or a suicide, or even a criminal. We're all mixed in, the permanent residents and the temporary, the clinically insane and the criminally. The latter makes for fascinating conversation. The bandage on her

arm tells me the rest of the story. Someone was a bad girl. I like her already.

I pick up her comb. Mine is missing several teeth. I need a brush—my hair is too thick for this tiny piece of plastic crap—but a fresh comb is better than what I have. I switch them out, then get to work on my hair.

Without moving, in a voice low and melodious and laden with the sharpness of a thousand razors, she says, “Touch my things again, and I’ll kill you.”

“Right.”

I continue with the comb. She turns, and when I look up, I am startled. The hatred in her eyes is so intense it’s like a demon from hell is suddenly perched on the bed. Her hair floats around her head like a dark storm cloud, and I can practically smell the thunder coming off her. I take a step back and toss the comb on her bed.

At this movement, she smiles and turns back toward the window.



*Vail, Colorado*  
*FIS Alpine World Cup*  
*January 4, 2018*

“NOW COMING TO THE GATES, last year’s junior Alpine Downhill champion, Mindy Wright.”

Mindy hears her name called, and her heart pounds in her throat. She knows what they are saying in the booth. They are discussing her leap into the majors. A year ago she was the Junior World Champion in three disciplines and the overall. She is special. Unique. Now, barely one year into her adult career, she is killing it. They are comparing her to her heroes, Lindsey Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin, speculating that with this final run, she can overtake their records and become the new youngest Alpine Downhill champion. They are talking about her parents, their sacrifices, and Mindy’s grueling training, the intense life she’s led, uncomplaining, with a smile on her face all the time. Sunny. They call her the girl with the sunny disposition.

This sunny girl is going to become the world's fastest female downhill skier in less than two minutes, and then what will they call her?

Mindy can feel the energy in the air; the tension is palpable. She has a good chance, she knows it. Her practice run was at a record-breaking pace. She is going to blow this run away. The mountain is hers for the taking.

Everyone wants her to win this race and take the trophy. Trophy be damned, if she hits her points, she will automatically qualify for the US Olympic team. No pressure or anything.

She takes the little burst of adrenaline from that thought, lets it get her moving. The snow started falling intensely about ten minutes earlier. She'd heard the officials discussing whether to hold the skiers on the hill until it passed, but now their radios crackle with assurances that the blizzard is only at the very top and the course clears after the first turn.

Mindy readies herself, visualizes the course, her body bending and weaving as her mind takes her through every turn one last time.

A buzzer pulls her to the surface. There are no shouts and screams as Mindy slides into place in the starting house; the crowds are at the bottom of the mountain, less than ninety seconds away. It's snowing hard up top, not gentle whispers of white drifting down, but tiny flakes wedged together in the sky creating a perpetual wall of white. The eerie silence, the loneliness of it, makes her heart pump harder. She often feels like this when she takes her place at the gate. Beat, *alone*. Beat, *alone*. Beat, *alone*. It feels good. It feels right.

She adjusts her goggles against the blinding white and slaps her skis against the icy snow, digging in her poles, making sure her ankles are seated and her boots tightly clipped. In response, the snow seems to come down even faster; the first section of the course is completely obscured from her vantage point above the gates. She has to have faith that they won't send her down if it is too dangerous, that the reports saying it clears after the first turn hold

true. Anyway, Mindy knows this course like the back of her hand. She has raced here many times. Considering the awful weather, it is a blessing that the championships are being held in Vail. She has the home field advantage.

*Kill it, Mindy!*

It is her mom's voice, spectral and distant. It happens every race, and it's strange because she knows her mom and dad are at the bottom of the mountain, waiting for her to slide to a stop in front of them, her skis shuddering on the snow, her fist in the air, pumping hard because she's won.

Once, she'd told her mom how cool it was, standing up there alone, hearing her voice cheer her on. It had become the talisman, the good luck charm. Her mom smoothed down her hair with a quizzical smile and said, "I'm always with you, Mindy. No matter what."

Not for the first time, Mindy wishes her mom had ridden up the mountain in the gondola with her. She can imagine her perfectly: starkly beautiful, not speaking, her mouth tight, her blond hair mussed and sticking out from under her red snowflake hat, holding her daughter's gloved hand tightly. It isn't allowed, but it would be nice. Then again, maybe it wouldn't. Mindy sometimes wonders if her mom is more nervous than she is when it comes to the final run. She wouldn't want that negative energy seeping into her psyche.

*Let's go, let's go, let's go.*

Finally, the official signals. It's time. She slaps her skis against the ice again. Tight, a little grainy, and she can barely see the track now because the snow is coming down so hard. But she knows it's there, a long, invisible line flowing out from the tips of her skis downward. Without another thought, she leans forward, into the mountain, feels the hard bar across her shins. Sets her poles again. Takes a deep breath. Her coach's voice now. *Visualize it. Visualize winning.*

The beep sounds, three times, and at the last she's off, bursting out of the gate, poling hard, gaining speed quickly. She slices

through the first turn, a hard bank left, her downhill edge rattling against the ice. It feels good, so good, and she tucks her poles against her body and lets the skis take her through the first flat. The skies do clear; she can finally see the blue lanes of the race course. Into the second turn, she starts gaining speed, feels the total thrill when she accelerates to eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five miles per hour. She is a rocket, a cheetah, the fastest girl on earth.

Left, right, left, right, poles stuck to her body, over the jump, airborne, arms windmilling slightly, but she stays tucked perfectly, totally in control. She has it; she has it, she is flying down the slopes. She can hear the screams and cheers as she flies past. She knows with the assurance of years of skiing that she is in the zone, is going faster than she ever has. All the hard work, the ski camps, the weight training, it is all coming together.

Left. Right. Left. Tuck.

The burst of swirling snow comes from nowhere. It catches her full in the face just as she makes the last gate. Her skis slip out of the ruts. The tip of her left ski hits the plastic guard of the flag, and she is in midair, flying for real this time.

Everything is silent. She doesn't hear the gasps, the screams, just focuses on relaxing, like she's always been taught. Though she is airborne, if she isn't too far off, she can still make it if she keeps her tuck, lands correctly, gets the damn right ski down, and makes the next turn... The flag slaps her in the face, and she goes down in a flurry of skis and poles and snow.

She doesn't know how long she lies there before she registers she has crashed. Her champion's body resists the idea, continues to make the turns, her torso writhing in the snow.

*The snow is cold.*

*My face hurts.*

*My leg hurts.*

Her eyes are closed. She opens them to whiteness. *I'm blind, oh my God*, then realizes her face is freezing. She is facedown. She plants her arms in the snow and tries to rise. The pain in her leg is white-hot, and she cries out. Seconds later, she is surrounded. Ski

patrols, red jackets, white crosses. The first touch is from a woman, her face deeply tanned, her goggles opaque.

“Your leg’s broken, sweetie, try not to move. I know it’s cold. Hang tight. We’ll get you splinted and get you on the sled.”

“My leg? It’s broken? How do you know? Did I make it all the way down?”

“Tough girl, you didn’t. You tagged that last flag, and it knocked you upside down. You did a backflip, came down hard. You’ve been out for a few minutes. Pretty spectacular crash. And your leg...trust me, honey, it’s broken. No, no, don’t look.”

Mindy ignores the admonition, wishes she hadn’t. There is a large jag of white sticking out of her shin. Her blood looks like rubies against the icy slush. She fights back the urge to scream. “But my time...if I don’t finish, I’m DQd from the event. I have to get down. You’ve gotta let me up.”

The patrol’s voice is sympathetic. “You’re out of it, now, sweetie, I’m sorry. Maybe you have enough points to qualify from your other races. But you can’t go anywhere, this leg’s pretty gnarly. Okay, here’s the splint, hang tight, this is going to hurt like a bitch.”

Mindy grits her teeth as they start pumping up the air cast. Fights back the tears, focuses on the voice that keeps saying, *you didn’t make it, you didn’t make it*. She stops fighting, tries to relax as they lift her into the sled and start down the remainder of the mountain. She tries to be a good sport about it, as she’s been taught, raises a fist toward the worried faces, and the crowd goes absolutely wild, cheering for their girl, but inside she is wailing.

She wanted this so badly. It’s all she’s ever wanted. And she’s blown it.

What happened? She runs the course again in her mind, realizes there is a big blank. She doesn’t remember how she went down. She knows this isn’t entirely unusual, she’s heard about it happening to other racers. She’s been so blessed, so lucky, never to have had a major injury. Granted, she’s seventeen, and she’s only been on the circuit at this level for a year. But still.

*What if I can never ski again?*



This spike to her heart is too much to bear. She wipes away tears as they reach the bottom. Her dad is waiting; she can see his bright red North Face jacket, concern etched on his handsome face. He pushes aside two ski patrols and kneels beside her.

“Poor baby. Does it hurt?”

“Daddy, I didn’t make it.”

“Let’s worry about your leg first, peanut, then we’ll worry about the rest.”

“I don’t remember falling. What happened?”

“Microburst of snow. Came out of nowhere.” As if to prove his point a swirl of snow surrounds them. Her father says, “They really should close the course, it’s too dangerous now.” He pats her hand. Mindy can only feel pressure through the glove, not the warm reassurance of her father’s hand.

“Where’s Mom?”

“I’m right here, honey. Right here. You’re okay. I’m here.”

Mindy hears the calm concern of her mother’s voice and takes a deep breath. If her mom isn’t frantic, it isn’t too bad.

“Mom will meet us at the hospital, honey. They won’t let us both ride with you. She’s going to drive the car—”

“No!”

Her dad’s face registers a tiny bit of shock. “Okay, no worries. Mom will ride with you, and I’ll bring the car.”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t care who rides with me. But we can’t leave. I need to find out who wins.” As she speaks, she hears them blow the horn. The course is being closed.

Her dad’s smile warms her. He leans close, whispers, “Maybe we’ll get lucky. You’re still in first place overall.”

The EMT isn’t quite glaring at them but is clearly anxious to get moving. “We have to take her now, folks. Who’s riding with us?”

Her mom presses her palm against Mindy’s cheek, unstraps her helmet. “Hang tight, baby. I’ll meet you at the hospital. We’ll get you fixed up. Be strong.”

Mindy grits her teeth again when they put her into the ambulance; the jostling makes red-hot poker shoot through her leg. Her

mother's face disappears as the doors slam closed, the worry etched as deep as a fissure in granite.

Her dad takes a seat on the bench, trying to stay out of the way. The paramedic leans over her, takes her blood pressure and pulse. She tries to stay calm, not cry, not fall apart. All she can think about is her coach's disappointment that someone else will be standing on the podium because she got too aggressive toward the bottom and let her ski get caught in that rut. He's always told her aggressive equals arrogance, and arrogance equals crash.

"Mindy, I'm Todd. I'm going to start an IV and give you some pain meds so that leg doesn't hurt so bad. Okay? A little pinch here, hang tight...that's a brave girl, well done."

Within moments, the horrible pain in her leg is gone. Her thoughts become disjointed.

*Arrogant Crash. That's a good band name. I wonder if they'll let me have the gate I hit. Would it be arrogant to ask? The snow was so cold.*

*I didn't make it.*

Mindy doesn't care, which surprises her. She feels sleepy and warm, hears her dad and Todd talking. And then there is nothing.

\* \* \*

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*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author J.T. Ellison writes standalone domestic noir and psychological thriller series, the latter starring Nashville Homicide Lt. **Taylor Jackson** and medical examiner **Dr. Samantha Owens**, and pens the international thriller series "A Brit in the FBI" with #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Catherine Coulter. Cohost of the EMMY Award-winning television show, *A Word on Words*, Ellison lives in Nashville with her husband and twin kittens.

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