

SWEET
LITTLE
LIES

CAZ FREAR

ZAFFRE



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*For Alex, Chessy, Fifi and William,
and Mick*

I recall the day we heard about Maryanne with high-definition clarity, although I know nothing about what happened to her, nor the manner in which she left.

I don't offer this by way of an alibi. Neither is it a well-practised defence. After all, it's not as if I've ever had to explain myself – on the scale of likely suspects I was always nestled firmly alongside Gran, hovering somewhere between 'laughable' and 'nigh-on impossible' – and yet in order to understand the demons that hound me, and indeed in the spirit of the police oath I claim to hold so dear, I feel it's necessary to make clear that I know nothing about what happened to Maryanne Doyle, the girl who went to Riley's for hairspray and never came back.

I have my suspicions, of course.

I speculate plenty, especially after white wine.

But when it comes right down to it, I actually know nothing.

The same cannot be said of my father.

1998

It was 31st May 1998 and we'd been kicking around Mulderin for over a week. I was eight years old, podgy, with a head full of greasy curls and a mouth full of wobbly teeth, and I was almost certainly wearing my Pokemon T-shirt. Back home in London, my friends were getting ready to go back to school after the half-term holiday but Dad had just announced, between mouthfuls of toast, that we had 'special dispensation' to stay on at Gran's for another week, earning him a high-five from my big sister Jacqui and a slap across the face from Mum.

Trying to diffuse a tension I didn't understand, I looked up from my Pop Tarts. 'Mum, what does "dispensation" mean?'

Mum rolled her sleeves up like a yobbo about to start a pub fight. 'Look it up in the dictionary, sweetheart. You'll find it near "dishonest" and "disgrace".'

Jacqui stretched across the table for a yoghurt, her tangled blonde hair shielding her cocksure grin. 'It means Dad told the school to go fuck themselves.'

Mum eyeballed Dad like a piece of rotten meat.

Dad, not Jacqui.

But then everything was Dad's fault. Jacqui's gob. Noel's grades. My podginess. Even the good stuff, like the presents that kept appearing at the foot of our beds, and the new hi-fi – a real top-of-the-range one, according to Dad – ended up

tarnished by the stain of Mum's disapproval. Even this trip to see Gran, the first holiday we'd had in three years: 'Call this a break?' she'd said, as we'd queued for the boat at Holyhead. 'It's just cooking and cleaning in a different house. A house that doesn't have a dryer or a decent Hoover.'

Weighing up the scene before me like the shrewd little politician I'd learned to be, I stuffed a Pop Tart into the band of my leggings and made myself scarce, figuring it was only a matter of time before the spotlight shifted and I'd be switched from passive observer to sitting target. When Mum was like that it was always a fine line to tread.

Other things I remember.

I ate malt loaf for lunch that day. Four fat wedges slathered thick with real butter. Gran loved to watch people eat, always complaining that the only person who ever called to the house was that scrawny one from the Department of Social Protection and you'd be all day trying to get her to eat a biscuit. 'Not like you,' she'd say, cheerleading me through a plate of ham sandwiches that you wouldn't give to a wrestler. 'Now you wouldn't get blown down in a strong wind, my Catrina.'

Later, because I'd behaved at Mass (and hadn't told Mum about the stop at the phone box on the way back), Dad gave me two pounds to spend at Riley's on stickers and sweets.

It was also the day that Geri left the Spice Girls.

With loved ones and family pets all still alive and kicking at this point, Geri's departure was the first sense of

loss I'd experienced in my eight short years. The first stab of betrayal. It was Jacqui who broke the story – a fantastic coup for an English girl abroad – and I can still see her now, hurtling towards me across Duffy's field, her voice breathless with scandal, completely betraying the cool-as-ice image she'd been emulating since meeting Maryanne Doyle earlier in the week.

'Can you believe it, the bitch! The fat ginger Judas. So much for friendship never ends! Are you OK, little one?'

I wailed into her armpit with all the power and persistence of a colicky baby.

'There's a helpline you can ring,' Jacqui said, hugging me in the way that only big sisters can, smothering me in a cloud of menthol cigarettes and CK One. 'I'll walk you to the phone box later, if you like. Or I think I saw that Maryanne girl with a mobile? She might lend it to us if we give her something. Do you still have that two pounds?'

I didn't have the two pounds, and I didn't have any stickers or sugary things to show for it either. No sooner was it in my hand than Noel, my older brother and monumental shitbag, had snatched it away, warning me I wouldn't see my ninth birthday if I even thought of grassing him up. While I was fairly sure he wouldn't harm me – he was way too scared of Dad for a start – the mere threat of Noel's presence with his red sniffy nose and jagged dirty nails was enough to render me silenced and frankly, most days I wished he was dead.

So what with Mum slapping Dad, Geri turning traitor and Noel stealing my hush money, May 31st 1998 hadn't exactly

been a great day for me. In fact, I wrote in my diary that it was the 'Worst Day Ever in the Entire History of the Whole World Ever'. Even worse than the day I'd been sick on the escalators in Brent Cross and Noel told everyone I had AIDS.

It was so bad I hadn't even noticed Maryanne was missing.

Maryanne was Jacqui's friend, so Jacqui insisted anyway. I never saw them exchange anything other than the odd funny fag and back-handed compliment. If I had to sum it up, I'd say Maryanne was oblivious to Jacqui, who at just fourteen was three years her junior and still in her training bra.

I'd looked up the word 'oblivious' after Jacqui had stomped into Gran's one night, raging about Maryanne and her mates going off with some 'bog-boys,' which meant she'd had to walk home in the dark.

'I'm telling you, that Doyle one's oblivious to anyone's feelings,' Mum said, stirring a pan of hot milk for Gran's brandy-laced cocoa. 'The mother was the same, though God forgive me, I shouldn't speak ill of the dead.'

I certainly wasn't oblivious to Maryanne. From the second I clapped eyes on her, I'd been dogged in my pursuit of this glittering creature in her baby-doll smocks and hoops the size of Catherine Wheels – trailing behind her and her crew, mute with reverence and pained shyness, looking to get involved in literally anything they'd let me. Not that they ever did let me. In fact, she only ever deigned to acknowledge my existence once, at the Farmers' Market that was held every Friday in the town square.

It was two days before she disappeared.

'Hey, I like your Tinkerbell,' she said, touching the tiny pink pendant that hung around my neck – a Holy Communion gift from an aunt who wasn't big into Jesus. 'Where'd you get it? It's gorgeous! Look, it matches my belly-button ring, dead-on!'

She inched up her top and a group of tanked-up lads, wolfing chips out of cones, requested loudly that she get more than her belly-button out. Maryanne wasn't ruffled though. She just flicked them the Vs and turned back to me.

But then Maryanne wasn't exactly short of admirers. With her liquorice-black curls and blossom-pink pout, most boys turned into cartoon clichés around her – eyes out on stalks, steam billowing from ears, blood-red hearts pumping outside their puny adolescent chests.

And it wasn't just the boys either.

It was the men.

The husbands.

The dads.

Dad told a lie that holiday. A big snarling monster of a lie. The kind that grown-ups always say you should never ever tell.

The kind that always comes back to haunt you.

There was only one person who knew it was a lie but eight-year-olds don't count, do they? Eight-year-olds are too busy with their stickers and their sweets and their Pokemon

and their Spice Girls to ever have a clue about what's really going on.

Dad made lots of mistakes that holiday but his biggest was to equate being eight with being stupid.

Because I know he told a lie about Maryanne Doyle.

I know it truer than I know my own name.

1

Four p.m. Every Monday. For one hour. For the next eight weeks.

In roughly the same timeframe I could achieve something tangible, left to my own devices.

I could learn to code like every good little Millennial, or master the perfect soufflé.

But what I can't do is change the past. I can't redraft the god-awful ending or whitewash the dirt. These cosy, weekly, early-evening chats, well-intentioned as they are, can never obliterate the memory of tiny red footprints on cream kitchen tiles, nor wash crusty dried blood out of baby-fine hair. Nothing we discuss in this room can ever change what happened, and so it makes it all rather pointless in my book. Just a weekly invitation to my own private pity-party.

'Why are you here, Catrina?'

Dr Dolores Allen, playing beautifully to type, glances furtively at the clock – the signature move of her profession. I follow her gaze and see I've got eight minutes left.

I keep it brief.

'Because DCI Steele needs to tick a box so she's outsourced the problem to you.' The window's open a crack and in the distance I can hear a group of toddlers chirping 'Little Donkey', out of tune and out of rhythm. The sound soothes me and then savages me with each jarring note.

‘Basically, she thinks I need my head sorted and, lucky old you, she thinks you’re the woman to do it.’

‘And what do you think?’

‘Little Donkey. Carry Mary, safely on her way . . .’

‘I think she might be right.’ I nod towards a wall peppered with achievements. ‘I mean, Masters from Queens, BPS, BACP. Very impressive. A BA in Textile Design, that’s me. Or a BA in Colouring In, as Steele calls it.’

She smirks. Or at least I think it’s a smirk. Dr Dolores Allen has one of those Mona Lisa mouths, the kind that makes you think that you’re not quite in on the joke. It’s an unfortunate mouth for a psychologist to have when you think about it. Wry smiles rarely win deep trust.

‘Catrina, I’m interested that you referred to yourself as a “problem” just now. Is that how you see yourself?’

I shift awkwardly in my chair and the scrunching of the leather fills the silence while I try to work out how to answer without digging myself in deeper. ‘Everyone defines themselves by their problems, don’t they?’

‘They do?’

‘Of course. Everyone beats themselves up: “I’m fat,” “I’m single,” “I’m broke.” Take my sister, Jacqui, for example . . .’

‘Your sister didn’t walk into a prostitute’s bedsit to find a blood-soaked child brushing the hair of her horrifically mutilated mother.’

Emotional bushwhack.

Dr Allen’s face is blank, her tone entirely neutral, but her words are like spears prodding me back into that room

with all the blood and the piss and the cheap, slashed-up furniture. I stare her down while desperately scrabbling about in my brain for something vacuous to focus on. Anything just to block it out. I settle on a puerile joke DC Craig Cooke sent me this morning. Something about his penis and a Rubik's Cube but I can't remember the punchline.

She leans forward and I instinctively lean back, an animal scolded. 'I'm sorry to provoke you, but you have to think about what happened. You have to confront it.'

'Don't give up now, Little Donkey. Bethlehem's in sight . . .'

I pull my coat tight around me, a textbook defensive stance. 'The only thing I need to *confront* is how to stop Steele shipping me out on secondment. Have you heard the latest? The Financial Intelligence Unit! I may be many things, Dr Allen, but "financially intelligent" isn't one of them.'

'You should keep an open mind. Maybe Murder isn't right for you?' It's a loaded statement dressed up as a question. Fair play to her. 'Why do you view a move as a negative thing? My understanding from DCI Steele is that it's quite the opposite. A secondment could be . . .'

'Beneficial? Good for my development? I see you got the same memo.'

'Cynicism is a common state of mind for people who've experienced a traumatic event.'

I laugh quietly into the collar of my coat. 'Cynicism is a common state of mind for a police officer, Dr Allen. In fact, I'm fairly sure it's part of the entry criteria. That, and the ability to lift thirty-five kilos.'

She reaches for her coffee, eyes locked on mine. 'Do you believe I can help you?'

I stare at my palms, pretend to mull this over. A clairvoyant once told me that the curve of my heart line means I only ever open up in one-to-one situations. I'm not sure Dr Allen would agree.

Eventually I look up. 'Honestly? No. But that isn't a reflection on you. I've had counselling before, for other stuff. That didn't help either.'

She keeps her voice casual. 'Anything that feels relevant to discuss here?'

'Not really. Some cognitive behavioural stuff for a minor eating issue. Family mediation after I keyed my dad's Audi TT and he threatened to break my arm.'

She doesn't react. 'Do you think you're beyond help, Catrina?'

'It's been said.'

'Oh yes? By who?'

I resist the urge to start counting people off on my fingers, aware that it might look a tad neurotic. I don't want to add 'paranoid personality disorder' to my school report, after all. Although it'd almost be worth it for the look on Steele's face.

'So this is what I'm paying ninety pounds an hour for? To be told something I already fucking know. Cat Kinsella came out of the womb thinking the midwife was looking at her funny – anyone will tell you that . . .'

'My dad,' I say. 'Repeatedly. And DCI Steele, obviously.'

She sidesteps the Dad thing again – different therapy, different hourly rate. ‘Surely the fact you’re here shows that DCI Steele believes you’re worth helping?’

‘Oh *come on*. You don’t get all those letters after your name for being gullible. Steele’s covering her arse, plain and simple. She’s worried I’m going to start wailing “PTSD” if someone has so much as a nosebleed, so she’s dumped the problem on you.’ I know I sound snide and disrespectful and a whole host of other things that I try hard not to be, but I’m a work-in-progress, what can I say. ‘Sorry, no offence . . .’

‘None taken, Catrina.’ She waves away my apology with a bony, jewelled hand and I notice a small gleaming Peridot, similar to the one I used to steal out of Mum’s jewellery box so I could pretend I was married to Gareth Gates.

‘By the way, no one calls me Catrina. I prefer Cat, if that’s OK.’

‘Of course. Although you didn’t need to wait three sessions to tell me.’ She rests her hands in the nook of her lap and I sense she’s about to go all *counsellor* on me. ‘Do you often find it difficult to say what you want?’

Et voila.

‘Nope.’ I say, draining the dregs of my coffee. ‘Although while we’re at it, I much prefer tea.’

She smiles, jots a few words down. I suspect it’s something along the lines of ‘uses humour to deflect discomfort’ rather than ‘remember to pick up some PG Tips.’

Outside the toddlers have stopped singing.

‘Look, honestly, I’ll be fine,’ I say, a bit *too* full of beans to convince anyone. ‘It’s the little girl I feel sorry for.’ I slow my breathing, steady my voice. ‘Tell me, will she remember everything that happened or could she forget, given time?’

I call her ‘the little girl’ so Dr Allen doesn’t start bleating about ‘*over-empathy*’ but her name is Alana-Jane and her favourite song is ‘Five Little Ducks’. I know this because she told me she sang it to her mummy to try to wake her up, and I know that she ate dog biscuits for two days because it was all she could reach, even when she stood on the pink bucket. I also know she wore a ‘Daddy’s Little Girl’ vest under her blood-spattered hoody and I *absolutely* know that her daddy killed her mummy, even if the CPS ruled that we’d face an impossible task proving it.

‘My only professional interest is in what *you* remember, *Cat*. What you might forget, given time.’ She closes her pad, signalling the end of our *tête à tête*. ‘You mentioned in our first meeting that you weren’t sleeping very well? Any improvements?’

‘Nah. But then I’ve never been one of life’s great sleepers.’

She shifts position, briefly energised by this admission. ‘Any ideas why?’

I shrug. ‘I lived above a pub until I was eight – it doesn’t exactly cement regular sleeping patterns. Or maybe I eat too late? And then there’s the cheap, crappy pillows . . .’

Dr Allen stands up and walks slowly towards the door. She doesn’t exactly look annoyed by my flippant response – I’m not sure ‘annoyed’ is licensed for use on



the ‘Counsellor’s List of Appropriate Faces’ – but there’s definitely a flash of something human. A silent scream of ‘*why do I do this fucking job?*’ that we’re all probably entitled to by the twelfth month of a hard year.

‘So, er, the little girl?’ Determined to get an answer, I stall for time, making a huge, almost slapstick performance of buttoning up my coat. ‘Do you think she’ll definitely be affected by it, long-term?’

‘At three years old, it’s very difficult to predict,’ she says eventually. ‘She’s unlikely to remember the details. She might even forget or block out the “event”. But it’s likely she’ll remember the feelings. And she’ll carry those feelings through life, into her relationships, her work and so on. Strong, innate feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity, that she may never fully understand.’

Spikes of deep discomfort when you least expect them.

The constant low-level dread that taints everything you do.

‘And of course at three years old, she’s not really old enough to understand the finality of her mother’s death. The irreversible nature of it. That concept will add a whole new complexity in a few years’ time.’

I picture my nephew, Finn – six years old and struggling with the concepts of broccoli, backstroke and three-digit sums.

‘I’ve bought her a Christmas present,’ I say quickly, just to stop the flow of her gloomy predictions. ‘One of those Frozen dolls. It’s Anna, I think. They’d sold out of Elsa.’



Dr Allen says nothing. In our fairly limited time together, I've come to realise that 'nothing' generally means 'bad' and that I'll be held to account for the *'over-empathetic'* Christmas present at a later date. Probably when I least expect it. But then maybe I've got her all wrong? Maybe she just has to get on. Maybe she has another soul to save, or Christmas shopping to do. Maybe she actually doesn't care once the sixty minutes are up. I have no idea what drives her to do her job. She probably feels the same about me.

'Merry Christmas, Cat.' She flicks the catch on the door and a whoosh of relief shoots through me. 'Look after yourself. You'll be with your family, yes?'

'Of course,' I lie. 'Twelve hours of rich food and poor conversation, same as everyone. Merry Christmas to you too, Dr Allen.'

The assumption that 'family' equals 'nurture' seems a little utopian coming from someone who deals in the science of dysfunction, especially after my 'family mediation' remark, but then a frosty Christmas week in a twinkly, bustling London can do that to a person and I'd feel mean-spirited not playing along, even though I'm not sure I've got the stomach for Christmas with my family.

Come to think of it, I'm not sure I've got an invite.

2

Fevered and ghoulish, like Satan's little imps, we sit and wait in darkened rooms, aching for death to bring us to life.

Welcome to a slow nightshift with Murder Investigation Team 4. Where the only crime under investigation is 'Who ate the last of DS Parnell's mince pies?', and the only questions come courtesy of Chris Tarrant on three a.m. reruns of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*?

You see, when you work for the dead, you work for a notoriously unreliable employer. Sometimes they're all over you, screaming their need for justice at every cursed turn. Conscripted by tortured ghosts, your need to serve them never goes away, not even when you sleep. It ferments in your stomach like a late-night curry, waking you at godless hours and leaving you queasy and exhausted for days.

But other times there's nothing. Nothing new, anyway. Just an avalanche of paperwork and quiz show repeats.

They can never prepare you for the down-time, for the sedentary stage that follows the kill. When you're holed up at Hendon – the Met's training centre for new recruits – and you're being dazzled by mock courtrooms and flashing blue lights, you can never quite believe that admin will soon become your god. Data, your religion.

I certainly couldn't anyway, although in fairness I might have been warned. There's every chance I just didn't hear it over the sound of my pounding heart every time a murder detective, *especially* the fabled DCI Kate Steele, took to the hallowed stage.

The slack-jawed child swooning over the prima ballerina.

'OK, for thirty-two thousand pounds, who is the patron saint of chefs?'

DS Luigi Parnell – nightshift's lead imp, and incidentally about as Italian as a bacon sandwich – jabs his Arsenal mug in my direction and winks at me like we're old allies from the trenches, even though it's less than six months since he alighted the Good Ship Gang Crime and took up with Murder. 'Come on then,' he says, 'You and Seth are supposed to be the brains around here. Enlighten me and Renée?'

DC Seth Wakeman looks up from a textbook, surreptitiously brushing pie crumbs off his jumper. 'No idea, Sarge.'

'Nor me,' I tell him. 'I'll Google it.'

Parnell looks pseudo-disgusted and swivels back to the TV, muttering something about private-school educations and Google being the death of independent thinking. DC Renée Akwa laughs and offers me a crisp. I mindlessly grab a fistful even though I'm not keen on the flavour and it's only been an hour since we stank out the squad room with a garlicky pizza.

Awesome Renée Akwa. Twenty-five years a DC and as constant as the sun. I'd have sneered at that once, back when I had notions of progression but it's amazing what a flip-out in a prostitute's bedsit can do to pour concrete on your glass ceiling.

I squint at my screen, too lethargic to reach for my glasses. 'So St Lawrence is the patron saint of chefs. St Michael's the patron saint of coppers, if you're interested. He's the patron saint of the sick and the suffering too.'

Parnell doesn't rise to it, choosing to nag Seth instead. 'Here, Einstein, are you ready for another test? Fat lot of use Google will be when you're trying to remember "Revisions to PACE Code G" for your boards next month.'

Seth groans, pretends to hang himself with a strip of tinsel, and the laugh that breaks out goes some way to dissolving the twisted ball of angst I've been ferrying around since I left Dr Allen's introspection chamber earlier this evening. Later, as Parnell argues with Chris Tarrant that the Nile is *definitely* longer than the Amazon, and Seth gives us his rugby-club's slightly un-PC rendition of the 'Twelve Days of Christmas', the urge to do a Miss Havisham, to bolt the doors and stop the clocks and cocoon the four of us in our cosy-as-fleece squad room forever, overwhelms me.

And then a desk clerk clutching a Lemsip spoils everything.

'Luigi, you're wanted,' he croaks from the doorway. I struggle to hear the details as they huddle together – Parnell's shot-putter bulk blocks out all soundwaves – but I get the gist.

A body. A woman. Leamington Square, by the entrance to the gardens. Just at the back of Exmouth Market.

It looks suspicious. Islington plod have secured the scene. DCI Steele has been notified.

Exmouth Market.

Not strictly our patch, but when the other two on-call Murder teams are up to their eyeballs in bodies and you're just sitting around eating crap and procrastinating about paperwork, you don't start quoting boundaries and grid references. I don't anyway. Parnell gives it a try.

And with a creeping sense of unease that strips away all the notions of sanctuary I held just two minutes ago, I think to myself that it is my patch really. In the umbilical sense, at least.

I spent the first eight years of my life there.

Last I heard, my dad was back there, running our old pub.

Mixing with his old crew again.

Living the Bad Life.

At ten p.m. every evening, as punctual as a Swiss clock, Dad would excuse himself from whatever bar-room brawl he'd been refereeing and walk the few hundred yards up to Leamington Square Gardens to smoke his solitary cigarette of the day. Whether he was dodging Mum – an evangelical ex-smoker – or whether he did it for reasons of solitude and sanity, I never really knew, but I'd watch him most nights from my window, quickly throwing down whatever book I'd been reading by the light of my Glow-Worm as soon as I

heard his steps crunching across the gravel. Eventually he'd become just a dot in the distance, a flash of a phone or the flare of a lighter, but I felt comforted by it somehow. Happy that he had five minutes' peace.

He took me with him once. I was only six. Mum was at Auntie Carmel's so Dad warned me it was 'a special treat' which generally meant 'secret', along with everything else that happened when Dad was left in charge (crisps for dinner, a very loose diktat on brushing teeth, and illegal poker nights in the back room with the men Mum didn't like). It was the first time I'd been to the gardens at night – I'd been there often during the day, playing shops in the bandstand, hopscotch on the path – and after we'd been there a while and we'd chatted about *Toy Story* and my new puffa jacket, Dad asked me if I was frightened being out so late. He said most kids my age would crap themselves and start bawling to go home.

I told him I wasn't scared of *anything* when he was with me and he'd ruffled my curls and said that was right.

Tonight I feel scared though, and even with Parnell at my side, as solid as the plane trees that line the perimeter of Leamington Square, I can't seem to shake the feeling that no good will come of being back here.

Not quite a sense of doom, but one of nagging disquiet.

As soon as we're parked up by the outer cordon, I walk over to Parnell's side and let his genial grumpiness soothe me.

‘Forty lousy minutes and it’d have been changeover. Some other sod’s problem, and a hot shower and a cuddle with the wife for me. Jinxed we are, Kinsella, bloody jinxed.’

‘Doesn’t bother me,’ I lie. ‘No one to cuddle up to or switch the hot water on. Might as well be freezing my arse off with you.’

If I say this enough times, I might convince myself. Then I might also be able to convince myself to tell Parnell and Steele that I grew up less than a football pitch away from here. That my dad runs a pub so close you can hear the jukebox on a warm summer’s day when the main doors are open. That I lived above that pub until I was eight years old.

Before everything changed.

But I *can’t* give Steele any more reasons to ship me out of Murder, not after *Bedsit-gate*. Not that this is the same, mind. There isn’t anything procedurally wrong with having once grazed your knee on the same spot as a dead body. But then you don’t get to DCI level, with no fewer than four commendations under your belt, without knowing how to exploit an opportunity, and therefore any admission that I’ve got the slightest personal connection to this case and Steele will have me counting beans with the Financial Intelligence crew before I can say ‘Excel spreadsheet.’

As Parnell continues his mournful dirge, I weigh this up one final time, staring at my reflection in the car

window. All I see is someone who needs her job in MIT4 as desperately as she needs a fringe-trim and a big dose of vitamin C.

It's simple. I'll say nothing.