

'An excellent read' *Closer*

TWO

Two little girls walked to their death

LITTLE

and nobody noticed...

GIRLS

KATE MEDINA



Kate Medina

**Two Little Girls: The gripping
new psychological thriller you
need to read in summer 2018**

«HarperCollins»

Medina K.

Two Little Girls: The gripping new psychological thriller you need to read in summer 2018 / K. Medina — «HarperCollins»,

Two little girls walked to their deaths and nobody noticed...A gripping new thriller featuring the brilliantly complex psychologist Dr Jessie Flynn, who struggles with a dark past. Two bodies on the beach. One killer out for revenge. Two years ago, a young girl was murdered while playing on the beach and left in a heart of shells, a doll by her side. Now another girl is found on the same stretch of sand, another heart, another doll, and psychologist Jessie Flynn is called in to assist the investigation. But she's being led into a web of lies and deceit by a new patient, Laura – a deeply disturbed woman who wants Jessie as her friend. When links emerge between Laura and the two dead girls, Jessie's worst nightmare becomes reality. For in the dark world of a twisted killer, she begins to realize just how treacherous friends can be...

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Содержание

	6
Copyright	7
Dedication	8
1	11
2	13
3	17
4	19
5	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

KATE MEDINA
**TWO
LITTLE
GIRLS**



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Dedication

For Isabel and Anna, my two little girls

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Chapter 63](#)
[Chapter 64](#)
[Chapter 65](#)
[Chapter 66](#)
[Chapter 67](#)
[Chapter 68](#)
[Chapter 69](#)
[Chapter 70](#)
[Chapter 71](#)
[Chapter 72](#)
[Chapter 73](#)
[Chapter 74](#)
[Chapter 75](#)
[Chapter 76](#)
[Chapter 77](#)
[Chapter 78](#)
[Chapter 79](#)
[Chapter 80](#)
[Chapter 81](#)
[Chapter 82](#)
[Chapter 83](#)
[Chapter 84](#)
[Chapter 85](#)
[Chapter 86](#)
[Chapter 87](#)
[Chapter 88](#)
[Chapter 89](#)

[Chapter 90](#)

[Chapter 91](#)

[Chapter 92](#)

[Chapter 93](#)

[Chapter 94](#)

[Chapter 95](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kate Medina](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

1

Though the summer holidays had ended for most, there were still a few children playing on the sand, their parents – holiday-makers, she could tell – setting out windbreaks and unpacking the colourful detritus of a family morning at the beach. Others, local mothers in jeans and T-shirts, walked barefoot with friends and dogs, keeping a roving eye on their offspring.

The sun was shining, but the air felt laden with the threat of rain and Carolynn could make out the dark trace of a sea storm hovering to the south of the Isle of Wight, misting the horizon from view. Would it rain or would the sun win out, she wondered. Would the storm come in to shore or blow out to the English Channel? Who knew; the weather by the sea, like life, so unpredictable.

Raising a hand to shade her eyes from the sunlight knifing through the clouds, she watched three little girls in pastel swimming costumes throwing a tennis ball to each other, a small dog – one of those handbag dogs she'd never seen the point of – running, yapping between them.

It was a good sign that she had brought herself to West Wittering beach this morning when she knew that families with children would be here. Evidence of her growing strength, that she could stand to watch little girls playing, listen to their shouts and their laughter.

She was healing. Except for the nightmares.

On the edge of a carefully constructed calm, aware though that her heart was beating harder in her chest – *but still softly enough to ignore, and she would ignore it, she could ignore it, she wouldn't have another panic attack, not now* – she slithered down from the dunes feeling the talcum-powder sand between her bare toes, the warmth that it had soaked up from the long summer. A ball streamed past her feet, followed, seconds later, by a little girl, the youngest of the three, nine years old or so from the look of her, just a year younger than Zoe had been. She bent to pick up the ball, flicked a sandy knot of hair from her face and smiled up at Carolynn as she walked back to her sisters. Carolynn watched her go, transfixed by the shape of her body in the pale pink swimsuit; still pudgy, no waist, puppy fat padding her arms and legs – just how she remembered Zoe's limbs, a perfect dimple behind each elbow.

She realized suddenly that the little girl had stopped, was looking back over her shoulder, pale blue eyes under blonde brows, wrinkling with concern. Carolynn forced a quick smile, felt it flicker and fade. She dragged her gaze away from the girl. She wouldn't want her to think that there was something wrong with her, that she was anything other than a mother out for a walk on the beach, just like the little girl's own mother. That she was someone to be feared. A danger.

Pushing off against the wet sand, each footstep leaving a damp indent behind her, Carolynn walked on towards the sea. Ever since she was a girl herself, the outside, nature, had been her escape, her way of letting her mind float free. Over these past two years she had needed its uncomplicated help more than ever before. Today of all days, she needed it desperately.

A massive hulk appeared in her peripheral vision: a ship, loaded three storeys high with a coloured patchwork of rusting steel containers, grimly industrial and incongruously man-made against the backdrop of sky and sea and the seagulls swirling overhead.

Another memory, surfacing so violently that she caught her breath at its intensity. *A good memory, though. Don't shut it out.* Standing at the top of the sand dunes with Zoe, two summers ago, looking out over the Solent and watching a huge container ship glide past on its way to unload at Southampton docks. Zoe had been awed by its sheer size, a floating multi-storey tower block that the law of physics said should just turn turtle, flip upside down and be swallowed by the sea, it was so ridiculously top-heavy. The questions bursting from her without a break, words mixed up, back to front in her excitement to ask everything.

Where does it come from? Where is it going to? What's in all those big coloured blocks on the ship, Mummy? Why don't they all topple off into the sea? How does the ship stay upright, Mummy? Mummy? Mummy? Mummy ...

Carolynn's gaze had found the writing on the side of the ship's hull. *China Line*. All the ships that cut through the Solent seemed to be from China these days.

Toys, darling.

Toys?

Zoe's brown eyes saucer-wide, terrified she might miss the answers if she blinked for even a millisecond.

The day had been changeable, much like today. Grey clouds skipping across the sun, but still warm enough to walk in T-shirt and jeans, a cool breeze blowing in from the sea, the sand warm under their bare feet, holding the summer's heat. The last day of their long-weekend break.

'Can we watch the ships next time we come here?'

Reaching for Zoe's hand, feeling the spangles of sand on Zoe's skin grate against hers, squeezing tight, so tight. 'Of course we can, darling. If you're good. But you must try *very* hard to be good.'

They had driven back to London that night, she remembered: Zoe fast asleep in the back seat, exhausted by the fresh air, a layer of sand coating her bare legs and arms and pooled around her on the seat, as if someone had sprinkled icing sugar through a sieve; Roger miles away as he stared through the windscreen, exasperated by the weight of Sunday traffic, his mind already fixing on tomorrow's workday.

She shouldn't have come to the beach today. It had been a stupid mistake.

Next time.

She might go for hours with the sense that she was finally getting to grips with her grief, and then suddenly she'd be visited by a memory, an image so intense that it would take her breath away. And even the good memories hurt so badly.

Next time.

There hadn't been a next time.

She raised her hand to her mouth, pushing back a sob. *How could anyone believe that I murdered my own daughter?*

2

Jessie reached for the green cardboard file of loose papers on her desk, but her fingers refused to obey the command sent from her brain, and instead of gripping the file she felt it slide from her left hand, watched helplessly as a slow-motion waterfall of papers gushed to the floor and spread across the carpet.

Shit.

She sank to her knees, feeling like a disorganized schoolkid, ludicrous, unprofessional. How the hell was a client supposed to trust her judgement when she couldn't even persuade her useless, Judas hand to grasp a simple file? The disability constantly there, goading her. She should have stapled the papers, but she didn't like to. Liked to be able to spread her patients' – 'clients', the majority of them were called now, she reminded herself – files out on her desk, look at the pages all at once, her gaze skipping from the notes of one session to the notes of another, nothing in the human brain working in a linear fashion, so why should notes be laid out linearly, read sequentially? It made no sense.

'Please, just sit down. I can get them myself.' Trying to keep the edge from her voice.

'I'm happy to help.' The tone of the reply too bright, too jolly for such a benign statement. Everything that Laura said tinted with that Technicolor tone.

Even down here on the floor together, scrabbling to collect Jessie's spilled papers, Laura wouldn't meet her eye. Five sessions in and Laura had never looked her directly in the eye, not once, not even fleetingly. She wore a sober grey skirt suit and cream pussy-bow blouse, work clothes, from a life before her daughter's accident, but Jessie noticed a fine layer of sand, like fairy dust, coating her bare feet in the sensible, low-heeled black court shoes. She had been to the beach before she came here. Outside. Nature. Jessie wouldn't know until they started talking whether that was a good or a bad sign. Laura had told her in that first session, five weeks ago, that nature – immersing herself in nature, walking, or more often running now – since her life had changed in that one fleeting moment two years ago, was the only way she could force her mind to float free. To give up its obsessive hamster-wheel motion, if only temporarily.

Two years today, wasn't it? September seventh? Jessie glanced down at the scattered pages, trying to find the notes from Laura's first session to check, knowing, as she looked, that looking was unnecessary, the date cast in her memory. Seven, randomly, her favourite number. When she was a child, she used to change her favourite number every year on her birthday to match her age. At the age of seven, she had been old enough to understand that a favourite number wasn't favourite if it changed annually, and so seven stuck. It was only when she was older that she realized she'd happened upon 'lucky 7'. Seven days of the week, seven colours of the rainbow, seven notes on a musical scale, seven seas and seven continents.

Seven for Laura, a number forever wedded with tragedy. The day that her daughter, spotting her best friend across the road, had pulled her hand from Laura's and been hit by a courier's van.

Laura held out the papers she'd collected.

'Thank you,' Jessie said, taking them.

They rose. Clutching the file to her chest with her left arm, Jessie sat down in one of the two leather bucket chairs that she used for her sessions. She had positioned the chairs in front of the window, as the bucket chairs in her old office at Bradley Court had been positioned. No discs in the carpet yet, from their feet, to knock her sense of order off-kilter if patients nudged them out of line, the office and her life outside the army too new for such well-worn, comfortable grooves. She glanced over to the window, her gaze still trained to expect the wide-open view of lawns sweeping down to the lake, saw instead a brick Georgian terrace. Her ears, tuned to birdsong, heard the hum of traffic. The architecture was beautiful, the road narrow, quiet, but this new environment was grating

all the same. Grating, Jessie admitted to herself in her more honest moments, purely because it wasn't Bradley Court. Wasn't her old life. A life that she hadn't voluntarily surrendered.

She looked down at her left hand. The scar across her palm from the knife attack was still a gnarled, angry purple. Two finer, paler tracks ran perpendicular, where the surgeon had peeled back her skin to repair the severed tendons, a row of pale spots either side of the main scar where he had sewn her palm back together, each stitch identical in length and equidistant, a triumph of pedanticism, the best job that could be done, given the severity of damage to her extensor tendons, he had assured her. It still felt as if it belonged to someone else – the grotesque hand of a mannequin. Occasionally it obeyed her; more often it didn't.

She sensed Laura watching her, looked up quickly to try to catch her eye, saw her gaze flash away.

'We can sit at the desk, if it's easier,' Laura murmured.

Jessie shook her head. The barrier of the desk was too formal, too divisive for such a tense, skittish patient. 'How was the beach?' she asked.

'Huh?' Laura's eyes, fixed resolutely on a point just to the left of Jessie's, on a blank spot of wall, Jessie knew without needing to look, widened.

'Sand. Your feet.'

Laura glanced down. 'Oh, I thought you were a mind reader for a second.' A tentative, distant smile. 'I'd hate you to actually be able to read my mind.'

Jessie returned the smile, watching Laura's expression, listening to the nuances in her voice. The forced jollity, like a game-show host worried for her job, always, irrespective of the subject matter.

'So how was it?' she prompted.

'What?'

'The beach?'

Laura took a moment, and Jessie noticed the apple in her throat rising and falling with the silence, as if the answer was sticking in her craw.

'Fine ... good.'

Using the oldest trick in the book, Jessie acknowledged her words with a brief nod, but remained silent. Dipping her gaze to Laura's file, she tapped her fingers along the papers' edges, smoothed her fingertips around the corners, perfectly aligning each sheet with the others and the edge of the file.

Laura's voice pulled her back. 'There were ... there were children there. Girls. Little girls. Three, playing with a ball.' Laura let out a high-pitched, nervous bark. 'And one of those dreadful little dogs. The type that Paris Hilton carts around in a handbag.'

'How did you feel?' Jessie asked gently.

The apple bobbing, sticking.

'Fine ... OK.'

Jessie had learned over the five sessions not to probe too actively. The woman in front of her was tiny, blonde hair worn up in a chignon and liquid brown gazelle's eyes made huge by the persistent dark circles under them, roving, watching – always watching, taking everything in, but never engaging. They reminded her of Callan's eyes the first time she had met him, recently back from Afghanistan, the Taliban bullet lodged in his brain. The wary eyes of someone for whom the prospect of danger is a constant.

Laura's file said forty-one, but she looked at least five years older than that, late, rather than early forties, every bit of the pain she had lived through etched into the lines on her soft-skinned, pale oval face.

'The girls were, uh, sweet. They were sweet. One ran past me.' Laura's skeleton hand moved to cup her elbow. 'She had dimples, here. Puppy fat—' She broke off, the internal tension the words had created in her palpable.

'The storm held off?' Jessie asked, changing the subject to relieve the pressure.

‘It went out to sea. It was nice. Not hot, but warm, sunny.’

Her gaze moved from the blank wall to Jessie’s scarred left hand. It was clear from her questioning look that she wanted to know how the scars came to be there, but Jessie wasn’t willing to share personal information with a patient. She’d had colleagues who’d been burnt in the past, letting a patient cross the line from professional to personal. However much she sympathized with Laura and felt a shared history in the traumatic loss of a loved one far too young, she had no intention of making that mistake herself.

‘I have scars too.’ Laura gave a tentative smile. ‘And not just psychological ones.’ Slipping off one of her court shoes, she showed Jessie the pale lines of ancient scars running between each of her toes. ‘I was born with webbed feet, like a seagull. Perhaps that’s why I like the sea.’

They both laughed, nervous half-laughes, grateful for the opportunity to break the tension, if only for a moment. For both of them the subject – scars, psychological scars – was minefield sensitive.

‘Will it ever stop?’ Laura croaked.

What could she say? No. *No*, it will never stop. Your dead daughter will be the first thing you think about the second you wake. Or perhaps, if you’re lucky, the second after that. During that first second, still caught by semi-consciousness, you may imagine that she is alive, asleep under her unicorn duvet cover, clutching her favourite teddy, blonde hair spread across the pillow. But you’ll only be spared for that first second. Then the pain will hit you, hit you like a freight train and keep pace with you throughout your waking hours. This is now your life. Over time, a long time, it will lessen. One day you’ll realize that instead of thinking about her every minute, you haven’t thought of her for a whole hour. Then a day. But will it stop? No, it will never stop. Jamie never stopped, even for me, his sister. And for my mother? No, *never*.

‘It will fade,’ she said lamely.

Laura’s fingers had found the buckle of the narrow black patent leather belt cinching her skirt at the waist, the only thing preventing it from skidding down over her non-existent hips, the skirt having been designed for a figure ten kilos heavier.

‘It has been two years.’

‘I know.’

‘September seventh. It’s supposed to be the luckiest number in the world, isn’t it? Seven?’

Seven dwarves for Snow White, seven brides for seven brothers, Shakespeare’s seven ages of man, Sinbad the Sailor’s seven voyages, James Bond, 007.

Laura’s eyes grazed around Jessie’s consulting room, minute changes of expression flitting across her face as she absorbed the salient details: no clutter, no mess, spotlessly clean, the single vase of flowers – white tulips, Jessie’s favourite – clean and geometric, arranged so that each stem was equidistant from the next. The sunlight cutting in through the window lit tears in those liquid gazelle eyes, Jessie noticed, as her gaze flitted past.

‘Except that the bible doesn’t agree,’ Laura said.

Seven deadly sins.

‘It was my fault.’

Jessie shook her head. ‘No. We’ve talked through this, Laura.’ *Countless times*. And they would, she knew, countless more. ‘It was an accident, plain and simple. An accident with horrible consequences that you would have given everything to be able to prevent, but still an accident.’

‘That’s a mother’s job, isn’t it, though? To protect her child from harm. That above anything else, the one and only vital job. You can fail at all the others, but not that one. *Not that one.*’ Laura rubbed her hands over her eyes, smearing the welling tears across her cheeks. ‘I succeeded at everything else. All the stuff that I thought was so bloody important back then. Writing her name before she’d even started in Reception, reading level 4 Biff and Chip books by the Christmas holidays, number bonds to ten by Easter, even though learning was such a struggle for her. But it wasn’t important, was it?’

That was all a big fat lie.’ Her face twisted with anguish. ‘And the one thing, the only thing, the only critical job was the one I failed at. The job of keeping her alive.’

Jessie had faced her fair share of grief, her own and other people’s, patients’, in bland consulting rooms like this one, but the grief pulsing from this woman felt different. Like the grief she had felt from her own mother when her little brother, Jamie, had committed suicide. Grief and guilt. The overwhelming emotion – guilt. And something else too, something she couldn’t put her finger on. Why wouldn’t Laura look her in the eye, even momentarily? Still?

‘Laura.’

She nodded. She looked worse than the last time Jessie had seen her, just a week ago. Exhausted, thinner, if that was possible in such a short time, the black rings under her eyes so dark, they looked as if they had been charcoaled on. She reminded Jessie of a pencil sketch: there, but almost not.

‘It wasn’t your fault, Laura. None of it was your fault.’

3

The woman screwed her eyes up against the rain and the wind that drove it horizontally into her face and lashed the wet dregs of her blonde hair around her cheeks. She was alone on the beach, and that was how she liked it.

The gunmetal sea lapping the sand was deserted also; certainly no pleasure boats out this afternoon, but no ships either that she could see, visibility misted to a few hundred metres offshore, the primary colours of the rides at Hayling Island funfair across the mouth of the harbour resembling washed watercolour strokes on grey paper.

Weather like this caused holiday-makers to bolt for shelter. Duck into the cafés and restaurants on Shore Road, their steaming waterproofs draped on the backs of chairs while they had tea and cake; or potter around the pound shops in East Wittering village, throwing a fiver at their kids' boredom until the rain stopped or the shops closed, whichever happened first. There were too many people during the summer months, which was both a curse and a bonus for her. She watched them with suspicion and they watched her with more, used to seeing tanned, long-limbed girls in surfer T-shirts and board shorts at the beach, not the kind of woman they'd expect to see begging for coins around train stations in grotty town centres or rifling through the 'past sell-by date' bin in budget supermarkets.

She had mixed feelings now that the summer holidays were nearly over. She despised the tourists who arrogantly commandeered her beach with their hoards of possessions and their loudly advertised happiness. She hated them, but their presence occasionally brought her a windfall: things deliberately discarded, others left accidentally, having slipped from overflowing beach bags or dropped from baggy pockets. Items she could use, barter or sell. Days like this were good, rain following sun. She didn't mind the miserable weather because it cloaked her in solitude. Solitude was comfortable to her – she knew nothing other than loneliness. There had been only a brief period in her life when she hadn't been on her own, a wonderful, fleeting time that had changed everything.

The woman looked from the stormy horizon to the little girl lying in the dunes at her feet. The sand was white, the little girl's skin whiter, as if she had been washed sparkling clean by the rain. The tinny tune of a washing powder advertisement from years ago, from when she had used to be parked in front of the television for hours on end as a girl herself, chimed in the woman's dulled brain.

Little girl, far away in a world of your own, in a world built of dreams that are yours and yours alone.

She had wanted to be the girl in that advert. That perfect, soft focus blonde child playing in a meadow full of wild flowers. She had wanted, so desperately wanted, the crisp white broderie anglaise dress the little girl was wearing. But though she was blonde and fair-skinned, she had never owned a dress like that, never seen a field of grass, just the scrappy patches of dirt dotted around the tower blocks where she lived, where kids skidded their bikes and teenagers smoked and fucked. She had never seen a meadow, cows, sheep, horses; had never seen any animals aside from the pumped-up dogs dragged around on studded leather leads and the rats that scurried around the bins at night.

The eyes of the girl with the perfect white skin were open, staring fixedly up to the sky as if her gaze had been caught by one of the seagulls hovering above them on an updraught. They were cloudy green like the sea on a cold, clear day. Her hair was brown and curly, so dark against the sand and her own white skin that it looked as if her head had been caught in a halo of dirty seaweed.

Little girl, far away in a world of your own, in a world built of dreams that are yours and yours alone.

A doll lay next to the girl. A nasty plastic doll dressed in a cheap pink ballerina dress, with eyes that the woman knew would move if she lifted it. The doll's eyes were green like the girl's.

You've always been a quiet one, but I don't know, it doesn't seem to keep you any cleaner.

Shells ringed the child and the doll in the shape of a heart, a heart even whiter than the sand and the little girl's washed white skin. It was so long since the woman had considered love, felt love, that the shape of the heart knifed, just for a second, into a part of her that she had long since shut and padlocked. She shook her head, trying to shake off the memory and the feelings the sight of the little girl and the perfect pale heart surrounding her had brought to the surface.

Extending her foot, she nudged her toe against one of the shells, knocking it out of kilter, against a second, third and fourth, kicking them out of line too. She smiled to herself, a small, satisfied smile. The heart was broken now and that was better. A broken heart reflected the life that she had lived. The life this little girl would doubtless have lived, had she lived. Real hearts were for television advertisements and soppy songs written by fools.

Bending down, she fingered the necklace around the girl's neck. It was a silver locket; antique, from the look of it, engraved with two sets of footprints: those of an adult and, next to them, the smaller prints of a child. The silver was cold and her thumb pushed the wet from the engraved metal and left a dull print that was swallowed by raindrops the instant she pulled her thumb away. It would be worth something that, but she wasn't going to take it. She had her reasons for not stooping to that. For not taking a necklace off a dead child. Beneath the necklace's chain of silver coiled another, the thick dark chain of a bruise. Apart from the bruise, starkly black and purple against the soft white skin, the little girl looked untouched. Alabaster.

The woman stared down at the dead child and thought that she would feel something.

Sadness? Horror? Anger?

Or nothing? At least – nothing.

But what she felt was worse. It was a feeling that she recognized as satisfaction. Satisfaction that someone else would hurt the way she hurt every moment of every day. *Cruel*. When had she become so cruel as to enjoy someone else's grief?

Little girl, far away in a world of your own, in a world built of dreams that are yours and yours alone. Though I cannot share your dreams, you are still my very own.

A small part of who she was – who she used to be – hated herself for the feeling. But that person was so far gone that she existed in another life, a life that had happened to someone else, and the tiny nugget of self-hatred was easy to ignore.

She looked down at the bruised tracks on the underside of her forearm, the soft skin there almost as white as the dead child's, the needle marks dark as the snake of bruises coiled around the child's neck. The woman had lived by the sea all her life and she recognized weather patterns like she recognized those self-inflicted patterns on her arm. The rain had set in for the evening, at least. There would be no one else to disturb the quiet of the dunes today, walking where she had walked. She didn't need to rush. There was no urgency to tell the police. The little girl was dead. She would stay right here in her heart of shells and the doll with the matching eyes would keep her company.

Pushing herself to her feet, stepping carefully around the prone child, the woman walked on, the wet sand clinging to her bare soles, rainwater slopping around her toes. A packet of cigarettes caught her eye, damp, sodden, but she could dry them. Bending, she slipped them into the pocket of her jacket. A little further on, a two-pound coin, spilled from a purse or pocket. Lucky. A lucky day, for her at least. September seventh. Lucky seven.

Straightening, she walked on, eyes grazing the sand for treasure, leaving the dead child behind her alone in the dunes, staring up at the sky, staring up at nothing.

4

Icy water stung Carolynn's cheeks as she fumbled the front-door key into the lock with one hand. The plastic handles of the grocery bags cut into the wrist of her other arm; usually she would have set them down on the ground, but the path at her feet was sodden. It hadn't been raining when she'd left the house mid-afternoon for her run, but the sky had been a uniform ceiling of grey, so she had slipped her waterproof cagoule over her lycra tights and tank before she'd set out.

Roger's car wasn't on the drive so he must still be at work. Though she preferred it when he wasn't home, the thought of stepping into that oppressive little house, alone once again, made a sick feeling balloon in her stomach. Today of all days, she couldn't bear to be out among the crowds – couldn't trust herself to be in enclosed spaces with families, bracing herself against the sound of children's voices rolling in from down the street, or from another aisle in the supermarket. But now that she was alone, with no external stimuli to distract her, her mind was flooding with memories, pictures so vivid that she felt faint, knocked sideways with the pain.

Unbidden, an image from her visit to the beach that morning rose in her mind: the little girl in a pastel pink bathing costume. Where would she be now? With her parents and sisters, eating Nutella pancakes at the surf café? Tucked up on a sofa in a rented holiday home watching cartoons? Playing board games in a hotel lounge? Normal rainy-day holiday activities that she would never again do with a child of her own. Her goal when building her family had been to have pretty, bright, well-mannered children, to want to spend quality time in each other's company, to relish every single, simple moment. The thought of that dimpled little girl on the beach hurt like a weeping sore.

It wasn't my fault, she screamed inside. You need to believe that it wasn't my fault.

Grocery bags knocking around her bare ankles, she staggered into the kitchen and laid them on the clay-tiled floor. On a dull early evening like this, even with all the ceiling spots on, the kitchen was unbearably claustrophobic. Dirty cream walls and dark wood kitchen cabinets topped with black laminate work surfaces shrunk it to half the size it actually was, making her feel as if she'd squeezed herself into a cardboard box.

The house was a rental. A small white house jammed between the gate of a static caravan park on one side and a boarded-up, crumbling bungalow on the other. It was right by the sea, but you wouldn't know it, except for the stream of tourists wandering past in the summer, shouldering beach bags and clutching ice creams, and the brutal weather that rattled the window panes in winter. From the kitchen window, she could see the road and beyond that the concrete sea wall that wouldn't have looked out of place bordering a military bunker. It had been built head high and a metre thick to prevent the sea from eating up more land, but she couldn't see the point of being by the sea if you couldn't appreciate its beauty. And she did love the sea. Cheap and faceless, this was a running-away-to house, a hiding-away-in house. They had only planned to be here a couple of months until the furore surrounding the court case had died down and they'd decided how and where to rebuild their lives. But their London house hadn't sold – prospective buyers put off by having seen it on television for all the wrong reasons – so their hands were tied.

Hauling the fridge door open, Carolynn listlessly filled it with the shopping, every bend and straighten a gargantuan effort. She felt physically and mentally exhausted, wrung out like a damp dishcloth. She had eaten nothing all day and yet she wasn't hungry, was rarely hungry these days. She had to force herself to eat enough to keep her body grinding along.

As she flicked the kettle on to make herself a cup of tea, the cat jumped on to the island, leaving a trail of dusty paw marks from its litter tray across the black laminate surface. Revolted, Carolynn fought the urge to swing the full kettle from its stand and knock the bloody animal to the floor with it. The cat had been Zoe's, a Burmese, bought for her by Roger's mother because 'every child needs

a pet'. Carolynn hadn't needed to ask the subtext. Every child needs someone or something they can love unconditionally, that loves them back without reserve or judgement.

Didn't your husband become so alarmed about your ambivalence towards your daughter that he asked his mother to move into your house to look after her?

No.

And did his mother not live with you for a full eighteen months, from when Zoe was a year old until she was two and a half, until her husband, your father-in-law, became ill and she had to move back to her home to look after him?

No. It wasn't like that.

She'd tried hard to put her struggle with motherhood, all those negative feelings she'd had, behind her by the time Pamela bought Zoe that repulsive cat. She was four then. Pamela had used her fourth birthday as an excuse for the purchase, but Carolynn knew the real reason. Why were people – her own mother-in-law, for Christ's sake – still treating her as if she couldn't manage, couldn't be a proper mother, even then? And why did Roger let Pamela behave like that? Shouldn't he have supported her, his own wife?

Thereafter, did your husband not employ a full-time live-in au pair, even though you were not employed yourself? I put it to you that it was because he was worried about his daughter's safety if he left her with you alone. With her own mother.

That's not true.

You had severe depression, didn't you, Mrs Reynolds?

No. No, I didn't.

The prosecuting solicitor had kept interrupting her. Arrogant. He was so arrogant, he wouldn't let her speak.

Absentmindedly, she reached out to stroke the cat, but it arched its back, bared its teeth and hissed at her. *God, even the cat hates me.* The cat who'd been bought precisely because Burmese cats were as loving as dogs. She'd see it sitting on the garden wall, letting every damn stranger who walked up the street pet it, rubbing its head against their hands; she could hear its purr even through the glass window. And yet it couldn't abide her.

You were referred to a specialist mental health team because you had such severe depression.

Making a huge show of putting on his glasses, letting the jurors' minds linger on the words 'specialist mental health team', as if she was mad. He wanted them to think that she was mad. He hadn't understood. None of them had understood.

Depression brought on by motherhood. Isn't that true, Mrs Reynolds?

There was nothing strange about postnatal depression, so why had they used it against her in court? Tried to insinuate that she was crazy? Mental health was an issue for many people. Some philosopher she'd read had summed it up beautifully. She couldn't remember the exact words, but it was something about most people leading lives of quiet desperation. Life was mainly struggle, wasn't it? Hardly surprising then that so many people succumbed to depression, as she had done. She *had* found motherhood tougher than she had expected it to be. She hadn't fallen crazily and unconditionally in love with Zoe. Those weren't crimes.

Reaching for a tea towel, she flapped it at the cat, which arched and hissed again and then leapt to the floor, scooting a wide path around her legs to dodge the kick she launched at it. She'd find a furry patch on one of the cream sofa cushions in the sitting room later, no doubt. Have to wrap Sellotape around her fingers and pat her hand across the patch to collect up all the stray hairs, pick up the few that had stuck, like pine needles, in the cream cotton with her nails. Roger liked the house clean. *We both do – it's not just him.*

The kettle had boiled and she made herself a cup of green tea, paced as she sipped it, too stressed and upset to sit down, sit still.

September seventh.

Lucky seven.

Seven detestable sins.

She hadn't told Dr Flynn in her session this morning that, besides Roger and the odd impersonal interaction with people in shops around the village, she was the only living adult Carolynn spoke with all week. That she would talk properly to no one, bar her husband, until next week's session. That the sessions were rapidly becoming a beacon of light for her; her only beacon. She recognized a kindred spirit in Jessie Flynn. Flynn wouldn't tolerate a filthy cat padding over the surfaces in her kitchen. Those surfaces would be spotless – spotless and bright white. Everything in Flynn's house would be white, Carolynn imagined, and immaculate, just as her own house had been, back when they lived in London.

Though she was sure that Jessie would be able to disguise her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder from less perceptive patients, she couldn't hide it from her. Carolynn recognized OCD when she saw it, shared that desire for cleanliness and order, even though she wasn't a fellow sufferer. She would like to be friends with Jessie. She needed a friend, desperately. Someone who she could talk to, someone who would *understand*. They couldn't just keep running and hiding. Keep telling lies.

5

The seagulls were agitating Detective Inspector Bobby ‘Marilyn’ Simmons, unsettling him. There was a flock of them, circling overhead, like vultures orbiting a carcass, as if they knew there was a dead child inside that tent, as if they could smell the blood, sense death.

Later, he would accept that they were attracted by the people, himself included; a Pavlovian response after a summer of beachgoers tossing chips, burger buns and the fag end of sandwiches in their direction. But the sight of them, that ear-splitting squawking, made his nerves and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He was tempted to grab a handful of stones and hurl them up into the sky, throw stone after stone until every single one of the vile creatures had scattered, but that would give the smattering of reporters who had got the early wire about the little girl’s murder exactly what they wanted: DI Simmons demonstrating he was taking this case far too personally. Day one, an hour in, and already it had burrowed right under his skin. Even if he could continue to kid himself that he wasn’t yet drawing parallels with Zoe Reynolds’ murder – two years ago today, he had realized a micro-second after he’d heard that the body of a young girl had been found on West Wittering beach – the press wouldn’t be so forgiving. They would forensically examine in print any actions on his part that weren’t entirely by the book, seizing on anything that could be interpreted as proof that he wasn’t coping, that he couldn’t be objective.

Stripping off his overalls and overshoes and handing them to a CSI officer, Marilyn turned his collar up against the spitting rain and slid down the dunes on to the tidal flats, sucking the salt-laced air deep into his cigarette-ravaged lungs, grateful to be out of that claustrophobic InciTent and away from the sad, desecrated little body. Her green eyes were clouding over with a death film already, wide open, but seeing nothing, recognizing nothing.

Though civilization was barely five hundred metres away – £5,000,000 houses owned by city bankers who had cashed in their chips and retired down here with their families for the quiet life, others heading here at weekends – it always surprised him how startlingly remote this peninsula was, tied to the main stretch of the beach by a narrow bar of sand and extending like a bloated finger into the mouth of Chichester Harbour. Fifty acres of silky soft sand dunes topped with knee-high marram grass where children could play for hours, disappear for hours, even when the beach in front of the dunes was packed with holiday-makers. The local police had fielded many calls over the years from frantic parents whose children had gone missing on this stretch of coast. Most turned up an hour or two after they’d disappeared, having simply lost track of time. Years ago, when he was starting out in the force as a PC, before he’d had his own children and experienced parental worry first-hand, he’d done his fair share of trudging through these dunes, sand penetrating his brogues and gritting between his toes, calling out Noah or Amelia’s name, itching to clip the little sod’s ear when he or she was finally found.

The location should have been God’s gift for footprints, but that forensic avenue had been frustrated by the time of year and the weather: a rainy afternoon following on from a sunny morning and a string of sunny days before that, at the end of the summer holidays. Adults and children’s footprints criss-crossed his crime scene as if a herd of demented cattle had passed through; it would have taken forever to process each and every one, had the rain not obliterated the whole lot.

What was the little girl doing all the way out here anyway? Had she been in the dunes when she met her killer? Had she come under her own steam, playing with friends or wandering alone, or had she been brought here? And if she’d come with her killer, had she done so voluntarily, or had she been bribed or coerced? Easy to bribe a child of that age with sweets, easy to force them with threats. Simple for an adult to convince a child who knew them well to come and play on the beach for an hour.

According to the initial estimate from Dr Ghoshal, the pathologist, she had been dead for between one and two and a half hours, which meant that she had been killed sometime between three-thirty and five p.m. Whoever the child's killer was, he or she had chosen well, both in terms of location, weather and timing.

He didn't even know who she was. Only nine or ten years old and yet no one had come forward to claim her. For Christ's sake – what kind of home did the poor little mite come from?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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