

A person is walking away from the viewer down a dark path towards a bright light at the end. In the foreground, a red leather shoe with a strap and buckles lies on the ground. The scene is dimly lit, with the light source at the end of the path creating a strong silhouette effect.

IN THE DARK

**There one moment.
Gone the next.**

CLAIRE ALLAN

IN THE DARK

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avon.

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Dedication

For the women who held my hand and reminded me to just breathe when I walked into the waves during a very stormy year.

Epigraph

'Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!' – Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights

'If anyone injures his neighbour, whatever he has done must be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' – Leviticus 24:17–21

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Prologue

The process of exacting the perfect revenge is best viewed as a marathon and not a sprint.

If you're wise you play the long game. You make people think they're safe. You make them think that the worst has passed. That they've got away with it. You wait until life returns to normal. You wait until they are comfortable in the mundanity of their everyday existence.

Yes, you sow the seeds, of course. You set the wheels in motion. If you do it right, you create a drip, drip, drip effect until it all comes together. Until your revenge feels as if it has grown organically, and was always going to happen. Get it right, it can be a thing of beauty. Justice is, after all, always beautiful – even if you can't see it at the time.

The plan isn't the difficult part. Just remember the five P's: Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance. It's a motto that was taught to me in school that works well in all aspects of life. I've never understood how people can enjoy the doing more than the planning stage. The planning stage is such fun. It's when you can let your imagination run wild. Where you can play with scenarios in your head. Where you can play with people – test them. Push them. Confuse them.

It's where you can take your time to work out exactly how to make the punishment fit the crime.

Ask yourself: what do they truly deserve? Ask yourself if you'll be able to live with what happens next. That one's important. Because you don't have to be a bad person to want revenge. Wanting revenge doesn't make you evil. Or wrong. It's a natural reaction. It's what you're owed. No one but you will have to look yourself in the mirror for the rest of your days.

No. The hard part is patience. It's taking that hurt, and pain and grief, and sitting with it until the time is right.

You must make sure it's all perfect, because once the right time comes and everything is in place – once you light the fuse – you won't be able stop

it. You won't be able to extinguish it. You just get to enjoy it, and it will be all the sweeter for the wait.

And what makes it so enjoyable? Knowing, without a shadow of a doubt, that they brought it on themselves.

This is what I've been telling myself all along. I've sat and watched and considered everything, trying to keep a cool head. That's how I've coped – by viewing this all as part of a wider plan. As a marathon and not a sprint. It's how I've allowed myself to keep going. It has given me a purpose. We all need something to get us out of bed in the morning. Especially after the unthinkable happens.

Chapter One

Nora

We'd agreed to meet in the hotel lobby – a brightly lit, elegant space with views over the city centre. I knew I didn't want this Izzy person in my home – and Brendan was absolutely and resolutely opposed to that, too. But maybe I should've chosen somewhere quieter, somewhere more private. People will no doubt stare when I walk in. They always do. I've gotten used to that. How a room falls quiet when I enter it. I've gotten used to the nudges and the whispers. To people lowering their heads in case, God forbid, they make eye contact with me and are forced into any kind of awkward conversation.

There's not much they can say, after all. 'Hi, Nora. Any word on your missing child yet?' or 'Hi, Nora. Tell me this much: did you kill her and hide her body? I won't tell anyone, swear!'

People used up all their platitudes years ago. How it was awful. How they couldn't imagine. How God is good. (Ha! Any god who puts a mother through this is categorically and emphatically not good!) I've been advised to pray to St Anthony. I've had hundreds of novenas said in Daisy's name. Thoughts and prayers go nowhere when it's your child who's missing. It's all just meaningless mumbo jumbo. Thoughts and prayers are just words strung together by people who mean well but ultimately don't have to live through a moment of this hell. I've long since rejected any notion that religion can provide a comfort at this time, or at any time for that matter.

Over time, the platitudes were replaced by awkward silences. It was different, you see, when it was all fresh. When everyone was hoping they would be the one to play the hero and solve the case and we'd have a tearful reunion.

People get bored if things move too slowly. They give up if things don't move at all. There have been countless missing children since who have

stolen the public's attention and sympathy. I don't begrudge those children that. I'm not a monster. Or, at least, I don't think I'm a monster. (That's a little gallows humour – the kind of thing I'm allowed to think but never say. I'm not allowed to joke at all anymore it seems. God forbid I'd laugh. It wouldn't look right. No one understands how I can laugh at all; least of all me.)

All these thoughts tumble and crash in my head and I push them away as I spot a young woman with short dark spiky hair and a pair of large red-rimmed glasses looking around her. I recognise her from her Twitter profile picture. She looks exactly how you would expect a TV producer to look. All stylish, baggy clothes that hang off her petite frame, and minimal make-up. She probably has a skincare routine; a proper one. More than the quick wipe with a face cloth I indulge in while showering followed by a dab of supermarket-branded moisturiser.

'Nora?' she asks, in a soft Home Counties accent.

'Izzy?' I ask back and she nods.

'Thanks so much for coming,' she says. 'I know this can't be easy for you.'

'No,' I say, as I sit down grasping my bag to my stomach tightly. 'It's not easy. But that doesn't mean I don't have to do it.'

'I can imagine,' she says, her voice warm and soothing. She seems lovely and I'd like to believe she really is. But I've long learned that most people just want to take advantage of what happened to us so they can benefit themselves. So I just nod as a waitress arrives with a tray bearing a pot of tea and two cups, as well as a plate of scones.

'I hope this is okay with you? I can order you a coffee, or a soft drink?'

I suppose it's too early for a proper drink, I think. That would really get tongues wagging. 'This is fine,' I tell her. 'Honestly.' As my stomach grumbles I realise I've not eaten yet this morning and this scone is just what I need.

Izzy proceeds to attempt a little small talk as she pours the tea, but I don't have the mental energy for it. Not now. 'Look,' I tell her, after I've washed down a bite of rich fruit scone with a large gulp of tea. 'All I'm interested in is finding out what happened to my daughter. I want to find out if she's still alive somewhere.' It feels like a rehearsed line, even though it isn't.

'Do *you* think she's still alive?' Izzy asks cutting right to the heart of the matter and the familiar tightness in my chest grows stronger.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I wish I did. I wish I had some of that mother’s instinct that they talk about, but I don’t. I don’t know if she’s dead. I don’t know if she was kidnapped. At times I’ve thought I’d rather her dead than kidnapped and out there in a place no one is keeping her safe. I know that sounds awful, but what if she was trafficked somewhere ...’ I let the sentence hang. There’s no need to colour in between the lines on this one.

‘I can understand that,’ Izzy says, placing her teacup back on the saucer with a gentle clink. ‘Hopefully if we shine another light on it, something might show up. It’s a long shot, I know.’ She shifts a little in her seat, dropping her gaze for a moment. There is a beat before she speaks again.

‘Look, I’m going to be honest with you here. I’ve not been telling you the full story.’

The tightness squeezes even more. What is she going to say next? I lift my teacup to my mouth, but it’s shaking so much I change my mind and rest it back on its saucer on the table.

‘I want you to be a part of this. If I want the best chance at all of it being picked up – it has to be you. But if you feel you can’t or don’t want to be a part of it, I’m still going to make the documentary anyway. We will be telling a story, and we already have a number of interviews lined up. We’re scheduled to be here for the next fortnight, and we start filming in two days. You agreeing to get involved is the best way to get attention for this film, and maybe the best way to right some of the wrongs that have been said or written about you is to have your involvement. People are voyeurs at heart. They want to see grief. I know that sounds cold, but I’m not here to bullshit you. But if you feel you can’t be involved, we have many people who have already agreed to talk to us.’

I wasn’t expecting her candidness or for her to tell me they were ready to roll. The emails she had sent said plans were at ‘an advanced stage’ – but this is one step beyond that, isn’t it? She’s in production. This isn’t a case of her asking my permission to make the documentary – it’s throwing me a lifeline. Either I grab it, or I drown in its wake.

She is essentially telling me that she wants me to cut a metaphorical vein wide open on film and bleed for everyone to see. If I say no, will this documentary be a hatchet job? Will these interviewees she has lined up be people who have any real insight, or will they be the usual faces who spout their theories without any real authority? Most other documentary makers have erred on the side of the neighbourhood gossip approach to ‘evidence’

gathering. Just who does she have lined up to speak with when she starts filming in just two days' time?

What side is Izzy Devine on?

'Do you think I hurt my own child?' I ask, my eyes directly on hers. Even if she's a good liar I figure I'll be able to see something in her expression that screams of her true feelings. There will be a pause. A blink. A swallow of the truth before the answer she thinks I'll want to hear comes out. There's always a tell.

'You want an honest answer?' Izzy answers, unblinking.

'I wouldn't have asked if I didn't,' I say even though I'm scared of what she might say. If she's brave enough to say yes, then I know I'll have to do everything I can to convince her she's wrong.

'Okay,' she says, sliding her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. 'I don't really know what to think. It seems so improbable to me that a person can have no memory of something so cataclysmic. I know shock plays a part, but it's been seven years. Then again, I don't think anyone is that good an actress to be able to pull that particular lie off so consistently, and to confound the psychiatric profession too. But I don't understand how a person, especially a child, can just vanish from the face of the earth. People don't really vanish, do they? There is no Bermuda Triangle in the general Derry area,' she says with a hint of a conciliatory smile. 'Yet, all those searches, fingertip examinations of the woods and surrounding areas and there was no body found? No trace of Daisy at all? It doesn't make any sense. I mean, the only place any blood at all was found was in your house ...'

She lets it hang. This is the 'evidence' that so many of my haters cling to. 'But the blood ...' is a constant refrain from people who clearly have never lived with an adventure-seeking four-year-old. They treat it with the same reverence that they would a signed confession.

Blood droplets, minuscule, barely visible, were found on the tiled floor in the hall. Tiny pinpricks of red that matched my daughter's blood type.

'The only thing the blood in our home has ever proved is that Daisy lived there,' I snap back, feeling the nails on my right hand pressing into my palm. I must relax. I can see why so many people like to cling to something as tangible as blood spots. Especially in light of a dearth of other evidence.

'She was four. She was always running. Never stopped for a second. Was always speeding this way and that. She'd fallen in the garden that morning

and had limped through the hall to the kitchen where I put a plaster on her knee and kissed it better.’

I remember so vividly the trickle of blood running down the pale skin of her leg, soaking into her white ruffled ankle sock. She had been so brave – telling me in a sniffly voice that it was ‘just an ouchie’ and she’d fallen while chasing a butterfly. Her tears had dried as she’d told me about its soft colours and how it looked as if it was dancing in the air.

‘I know your explanation,’ Izzy replies, her voice an unwelcome intrusion on my memories. ‘I think I’ve read every interview and every word written about the case. You wanted an honest answer, so that’s what I’m giving you. I told you, I’m not here to bullshit you. I don’t know who to believe.’

‘So if you don’t know whether to believe I’m telling the truth or not, why should I trust you? I’ve been burned before – you know that. You know that’s why I don’t talk to the media anymore except through a spokesperson. It’s served me well. Tell me, Izzy, why should I change – just for you, someone who doesn’t know if I’m lying or not?’ I try to keep my voice calm, try to hide all trace of emotion, but inside my stomach is in knots. I want this woman to believe me. If I’m being honest with myself I want her to sit across this sofa from me and tell me she has my back and her documentary will fall very firmly in the Nora Logue camp. I’m not sure I, or my family, could survive another hatchet job. Another journalist who makes, then breaks, promises. I’m not sure I want to take the risk of this all blowing up in my face yet again.

‘Look,’ she says, and she leans in a little closer, ‘we’re on the same side of this, Nora. We both want truth and justice. We both want to know what happened that day.’

‘So you don’t think I’m trying to hide some deep, dark secret?’ I ask.

She gives a little shrug. ‘I don’t think you’d have come to speak to me at all if you were consciously trying to hide something, dark or otherwise. Whatever the truth is, I’m inclined to believe you genuinely either don’t know or don’t remember. Either way, getting nearer to the truth is going to help us both. Even if that truth is something dark.’

A shudder pulses through my body. Izzy sips from her cup of tea while I contemplate all that she has said. Are we really on the same side? The side of truth and justice? It sounds like a cheesy soundbite. But it isn’t. It’s the truth. That’s what I want. Truth and justice will equal the ability to move on

instead of existing in this limbo land. I'm so tired of it at this stage. So very, very tired. My life came to a brutal halt that day. It's no way to exist. The missing her is bad enough; the not being able to remember when I last saw her, what happened, if she was hurt ... My mind has filled in the blanks in a thousand unimaginable ways.

'So,' I say. 'You say you want to find the truth ...'

'I want *us* to find the truth,' she says, looking me straight in the eye, her voice steady.

'So, you want *us* to find the truth,' I repeat and she nods. 'And you're making this documentary with or without me?'

She nods again. 'Yes, I am. I think there's an appetite for your story to be re-examined again with new eyes. Putting you front and centre of telling that story is more likely to bring as many pairs of eyes as possible to the hunt for Daisy. We've already been overwhelmed with interest.'

'Interest from who and from where?' Is it just gossipmongers or people who might actually be able to help?

She sits back in her seat, getting comfortable. 'You've seen *Making a Murderer*, *Tiger King* or *Don't Fuck With Cats*? Or heard of them at least?' she asks. 'Of course those are only some examples but ...'

I nod. I have heard of those true crime documentary series; I've not watched them. I don't have the stomach to watch someone's real pain dissected in the name of entertainment. It's too close to home. But I've not been living under a rock and we do have a Netflix subscription. I have heard people talk about these shows, in the way some people used to talk about soap operas or celebrity gossip. I do keep abreast of current affairs, even if I try and limit my time on social media and stick to sites I know are safe. Places I won't be upset unduly by all the horror in the world.

'So obviously you know there is a huge appetite for true crime content at the moment. And that central to uncovering new leads, and even vital evidence in all these cases has been the dedication of the true crime community.'

I bristle. I don't have much time for the true crime community. I've seen how these forums have combed through every aspect of my life, ripped it apart and forced the pieces back together, creating some sort of Frankenstein's monster version of their perceived truth.

When Izzy says she has interviewees lined up and is ready to make her film, is she going to be relying on internet nutjobs and their insane theories?

What Brendan calls the real-life equivalent of Scooby-Doo's gang? Are these the people she wants me to interact with? To sit alongside while I tear myself into pieces for the camera?

I'm guessing she senses my discomfort because she starts to speak.

'I get that people are cynical of true crime enthusiasts and I'm not going to tell you that there aren't crazies all over the internet. But some of the users of these forums are incredible and, from your perspective, they could be pretty invaluable. There's one forum in particular I have been dipping in and out of for years – long enough to get a measure of the users and how they approach their research.'

'I'm not sure how that's supposed to impress me,' I tell her. 'Everyone and their mother has an opinion on what did or didn't happen. These forums are just a way for these people to gather together and convince themselves they have it all sussed. But no one has it sussed. No one has cracked it or worked out why my brain won't let go of its secrets. All these experts and no answers, why should someone sitting at home be any better at this?' I know my voice is louder now, and there's an edge to it, but is this really what Izzy Devine is bringing to the table? Is that what I'm supposed to put my trust in?

'They aren't like that, Nora,' Izzy continues, her enthusiasm growing now despite the pissiness of my tone, and I can tell she is all in. 'And that one I use, well, I've seen enough of how they operate to know without a doubt this is not just some ghoulish gossip site filled with weirdos sitting at home thinking they're the next Columbo. There are ex-police on there. Journalists. Forensic analysts. There's a profiler who has started looking over your case already. A forensics guy. Research experts who are collating all the media coverage, all the statements in evidence. We've asked for access to police files. These people are fascinated with your case.'

'My daughter,' I remind her. 'We're talking about my daughter. A real human being, not just "a case".' I know I sound prickly – but that's because I *am* prickly about it. We are not names on a screen or an unsolved mystery simply existing for people to pull apart and try and fit back together again like some macabre jigsaw puzzle.

'Of course,' she says, and has the decency to look contrite. 'I'm sorry. Your daughter. We can't really begin to understand how difficult this is for you.'

I pause. She's right, of course; there is no way she can know how awful this is. Or how many times people have promised help – that they will be the ones who will make the difference – only to let us down. It's true what they say – it's the hope that kills you in the end.

'Over the years I've seen a lot of well-intentioned people turn out to have little to offer but vivid imaginations,' I say. 'I'm sure you can imagine some of the horror stories I've read about myself online. Some of the hate. And that's without mentioning the death threats, the hate mail, the bricks through my window, the pure bile ...'

Part of the reason Brendan doesn't like me going anywhere near the internet is that I can only take so much of what comes my way. Avoiding what is said online is a healthy choice. When I have dared to look, I've rarely read anything nice about myself.

'If all you read is people telling you over and over and over again how evil, neglectful and horrific you are, that narrative starts to creep into the shadows of your psyche. You start to believe it,' I tell her. 'Even though I can't imagine myself ever being the person they paint me as. I might not remember that day, but I remember her. I remember how we were together. How we gelled as mother and daughter. Invincible. Or so I thought. What could have changed in the space of an afternoon to turn that on its head? And yet – because I can't remember, I can't let go of my own doubt, never mind anyone else's.'

Izzy nods sympathetically. Does the head tilt that signifies she's listening, but I wonder how much she really, truly understands?

'Look,' I tell her, 'I appreciate that in a few high-profile cases these wannabe detectives are able to see something or pick something apart in a way that hasn't been done before, but this case had an entire police force behind it. A massive search operation. People combed those woods and the surrounding areas. The eyes of the world were on us. I don't think ...'

Izzy nods. 'I understand your cynicism. I totally get it and of course this is more than just playing Inspector Morse for you. This is your child. Your beautiful girl. And it's your reputation, and your self-belief. But don't underestimate the ability of the true crime community to have empathy for what you have been through, or to have the passion to dig deep. Unlike the police, they aren't under pressure to move on to the next case. They aren't answering to a management team. They give their time to things like this because they genuinely believe they can make a difference. I know these

people. They're invested. They have the time and energy to re-examine things forensically – to look at the big picture as well as the micro details.'

'Daisy's case is still open,' I say, but even I know that while the investigation is in fact still ongoing it has nowhere near the manpower it once had behind it. The police have, they have told me, exhausted all current avenues. While they are of course open to new leads, and while once a year they release a new appeal for information, in real terms their search for the truth has stagnated.

'I'm aware,' she says. 'And I've been trying to get Detective Inspector Bradley to talk to me about it, but he doesn't seem too keen to chat. He seems to be a very busy man. Always in some meeting or dealing with some current investigation.'

She's subtle at making her point, but I know what she is saying. DI David Bradley, the senior investigating officer in Daisy's case, has bigger fish to fry these days. Cases that he stands a chance of solving. Still, it pulls at me that he hasn't made himself available to talk about the case. He has always been proactive in terms of securing media coverage relating to the search for Daisy. Maybe he has given up on us too. Or maybe he knows something about Izzy Devine that I don't.

Regardless, the upshot is that if even the token efforts now to find Daisy are grinding to a halt, where does that leave us? In some awful in-between place not knowing the truth?

I don't know what to say. Desperation that we are being left behind starts to claw at me. I can't allow that to happen. What kind of a mother would it make me to just let this fade into the background? How could I live with myself? How can I allow my child to become a faded picture, which looks dated, old, forgotten.

Heat prickles at the back of my neck and nausea swirls in my stomach. With all my cards on the table here, I'm not sure I have any real choice but to get involved. Some control has to be better than none, surely? And Izzy seems so enthusiastic. Maybe she's right that fresh eyes might pull something new from the abyss.

'Can I get a glass of water?' I stutter and Izzy nods, raising her hand at a passing waiter and asking him to bring two glasses of iced water. I am regretting the half a scone that I have eaten as it sits like a lead weight in the pit of my stomach.

‘I know this is scary,’ Izzy says. I assume she can guess my discomfort by the way I’m rubbing and scratching at my wrist. At the daisy tattoo. It’s a nervous habit. Sometimes I need to feel my skin burn, or tear. I don’t always realise I’m doing it.

‘I know it’s a big ask,’ she continues, ‘but on the flip side it’s a great opportunity to have fresh eyes examine things in a different way. People aren’t perfect. The police are far from perfect and while I have no doubt they’ve done what they can, things do get overlooked. You never know what we might turn up.’

Maybe, I think, as a glass of iced water is put in front of me, condensation already misting on the outside, I’m more scared of what they might find than I am of this void. There is a twisted comfort in not knowing the full story – I can believe what I want. That she is okay. That she is being looked after and loved. No one can tell me, categorically, that’s not the case.

I don’t know how I will feel if I find out the worst has happened. I shiver, my mind racing with thoughts. It’s overwhelming.

This documentary is happening now. Right now. I don’t have time to mull this over. I don’t have time to discuss it with Brendan any more. (I already know where he stands and I don’t think anything that has been said will change his mind. If anything the involvement of the true crime community is only likely to harden his stance.) It’s up to me to make the call.

‘Look, I know this is not work for you. This is not a passion project. This is your life, and the life of your daughter,’ Izzy says. ‘But I want to reassure you that it is very much a passion project for me. I was twenty-four when Daisy went missing. Working in a local newspaper in the Home Counties covering the most mundane of weekly fixtures,’ she says. ‘I’m not sure why; maybe it’s because my mum grew up here, or because I used to holiday here when I was a child, or maybe because it all just seemed so awful, but I was so drawn to your story from the very outset. I’ve been watching it ever since. I’m not going to make any promises about what this will or won’t achieve. I can’t even promise that it will definitely be picked up by a streamer or channel. But I will tell you that it’s my intention to tell your story to the very best of my ability.’

I nod, the itch on my wrist easing a little.

‘Obviously, that’s stronger with you on board,’ she says. ‘It could even be that my simply coming at this behind a camera lens puts a degree of

pressure on the police not to be seen to be resting on their laurels.’

I nod. She is making a fair point about the police. They aren’t going to want to be seen to have abandoned all hope of finding Daisy, even if that is what has happened. My stomach twists though. Do I want to open myself up again, so publicly to scrutiny? Is it different now – now I have Brendan to think of too. And Luca. Because it’s not just me anymore, is it?

Then again, I’m under scrutiny anyway. I can’t imagine a time when that will ever go away. My card is marked. I haven’t failed to notice the glances in our direction. I’ve seen how people lean in towards each other to whisper. I could draw the expression each and every one of them will pull without even looking. Wide-eyed. Slack-jawed. I’m the worst kind of celebrity. Infamous rather than famous – because who the hell would want to be known as the woman who can’t remember what happened to her child? And when he is older Luca will hear those same rumours, the lies and the theories.

‘You can change the narrative around this,’ I hear Izzy say as I tune back in to her hard sell. I realise what I have to do.

‘Okay,’ I say, even if there is a part of me that screams this is not going to end well. Izzy grins back, as if she’s a child who I’ve just agreed to take to Disneyland and not a professional documentary maker to whom I have just given access to my life.