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**Opening Extract from...**

# Little Lies

Written by Liane Moriarty

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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# Little Lies

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*With love to Margaret*

You hit me, you hit me,  
now you have to kiss me.

*Schoolyard chant*

Pirriwee Public School

*. . . where we live and learn by the sea!*

Pirriwee Public is a BULLY-FREE ZONE!

We do *not* bully.

We do not *accept* being bullied.

We *never* keep bullying a secret.

We have the *courage* to speak up if we see our  
friends bullied.

We say NO to bullies!

# Chapter One

‘That doesn’t sound like a school trivia night,’ said Mrs Patty Ponder to Marie Antoinette. ‘That sounds like a riot.’

The cat didn’t respond. She was dozing on the couch, and found school trivia nights to be trivial.

‘Not interested, eh? Let them eat cake! Is that what you’re thinking? They do eat a lot of cake, don’t they? All those cake stalls. Goodness me. Although I don’t think any of the mothers ever actually eat them. They’re all so sleek and skinny, aren’t they? Like you.’

Marie Antoinette sneered at the compliment. The ‘let them eat cake’ thing had grown old a long time ago, and she’d recently heard one of Mrs Ponder’s grandchildren say it was meant to be ‘let them eat brioche’ and also that Marie Antoinette never said it in the first place.

Mrs Ponder picked up her television remote and turned down the volume on *Dancing with the Stars*. She’d turned it up loud earlier because of the sound of the heavy rain but the downpour had eased now.

She could hear people shouting. Angry hollers crashed through the quiet, cold night air. It was somehow hurtful for Mrs Ponder to hear, as if all that rage was directed at her. (Mrs Ponder had grown up with an angry mother.)

‘Goodness me. Do you think they’re arguing over the capital of Guatemala? Do you know the capital of Guatemala? No? I don’t either. We should google it. Don’t sneer at me.’

Marie Antoinette sniffed.

‘Let’s go see what’s going on,’ said Mrs Ponder briskly. She

was feeling nervous and therefore behaving briskly in front of the cat, the same way she'd once done with her children when her husband was away and there were strange noises in the night.

Mrs Ponder heaved herself up with the help of her walker. Marie Antoinette slid her slippery body comfortingly in between Mrs Ponder's legs (she wasn't falling for the brisk act) as she pushed the walker down the hallway to the back of the house.

Her sewing room looked straight out on to the school yard of Pirriwee Public.

'Mum, are you mad? You can't live this close to a primary school,' her daughter had said, when Mrs Ponder was first looking at buying the house.

But she loved to hear the crazy babble of children's voices at intervals throughout the day, and she no longer drove, so she didn't care less that the street was jammed with those giant, truck-like cars they all drove these days, with women in big sunglasses leaning across their steering wheels to call out terribly urgent information about Harriett's ballet and Charlie's speech therapy.

Mothers took their mothering so seriously now. Their frantic little faces. Their busy little bottoms strutting into the school in their tight gym gear. Ponytails swinging. Eyes fixed on the mobile phones held in the palms of their hands like compasses. It made Mrs Ponder laugh. Fondly, though. Her three daughters were exactly the same. And they were all so pretty.

'How are you this morning?' she always called out, if she was on the front porch with a cup of tea, or watering the front garden as the mothers went by.

'Busy, Mrs Ponder! Frantic!' they always called back, trotting along, yanking their children's arms. They were pleasant



and friendly and just a touch condescending because they couldn't help it. She was so old! They were so busy!

The fathers, and there were more and more of them doing the school run these days, were different. They rarely hurried, strolling past with a measured casualness. No big deal. All under control. That was the message. Mrs Ponder chuckled fondly at them too.

But now it seemed the Pirriwee Public parents were misbehaving. She got to the window and pushed aside the lace curtain. The school had recently paid for a window guard after a cricket ball had smashed the glass and nearly knocked out Marie Antoinette. (A group of Year 3 boys had given her a hand-painted apology card which she kept on her fridge.)

There was a two-storey sandstone building on the other side of the playground with an event room on the second level, and a big balcony with ocean views. Mrs Ponder had been there for a few functions: a talk by a local historian, a lunch hosted by the Friends of the Library. It was quite a beautiful room. Sometimes ex-students had their wedding receptions there. That's where they'd be having the school trivia night. They were raising funds for smart boards, whatever they were. Mrs Ponder had been invited as a matter of course. Her proximity to the school gave her a funny sort of honorary status, even though she'd never had a child or grandchild attend. She'd said no thank you to the invitation. She thought school events without the children in attendance were pointless.

The children had their weekly school assembly in the same room. Each Friday morning Mrs Ponder set herself up in the sewing room with a cup of English Breakfast and a ginger-nut biscuit. The sound of the children singing floating down from the second floor of the building always made her weep.

She'd never believed in God except when she heard children singing.

There was no childish singing now.

Mrs Ponder could hear a lot of bad language. She wasn't a prude about bad language, her eldest daughter swore like a trooper, but it was upsetting and disconcerting to hear someone maniacally screaming that particular four letter word in a place that was normally filled with childish laughter and shouts.

'Are you all drunk?' she said.

Her rain-splattered window was at eye-level with the entrance doors to the building and suddenly people began to spill out. Security lights illuminated the paved area around the school's entrance like a stage set for a play. Clouds of mist added to the effect.

It was a strange sight.

The parents at Pirriwee Public had a baffling fondness for fancy-dress parties. It wasn't enough that they should have an ordinary trivia night. She knew from the invitation that some bright spark had decided to make it an 'Audrey and Elvis' Trivia Night, which meant that the women all had to dress up as Audrey Hepburn and the men had to dress up as Elvis Presley. (That was another reason why Mrs Ponder had turned down the invitation. She'd always abhorred fancy dress parties.) It seemed that the most popular rendition of Audrey Hepburn was the *Breakfast at Tiffany's* look. All the women were wearing long black dresses, white gloves and pearl chokers. Meanwhile, the men had mostly chosen to pay tribute to the Elvis of the latter years. They were all wearing shiny white jumpsuits, glittery gemstones and plunging necklines. The women looked lovely. The poor men looked perfectly ridiculous.

As Mrs Ponder watched, one Elvis punched another

across the jaw. He staggered back, into an Audrey. Two Elvises grabbed him from behind and pulled him away. An Audrey buried her face in her hands and turned away, as though she couldn't bear to watch. Someone shouted, 'Stop this!'

Indeed. What would your beautiful children think?

'Should I call the police?' wondered Mrs Ponder out loud, but then she heard the wail of a siren in the distance, at the same time as a woman on the balcony began to scream and scream.

\*

Gabrielle: It wasn't like it was just the mothers, you know. It wouldn't have happened without the dads. I guess it *started* with the mothers. We were the main players, so to speak. The mums. I can't stand the word mum. It's a frumpy word, don't you think? Mom is better. With an 'o'. It sounds skinnier. We should change to the American spelling. I have body image issues, by the way. Who doesn't, right?

Bonnie: It was all just a terrible misunderstanding. People's feelings got hurt and then everything just spiralled out of control. The way it does. All conflict can be traced back to someone's feelings getting hurt, don't you think? Divorce. World wars. Legal action. Well, maybe not every legal action. Can I offer you a herbal tea?

Stu: I'll tell you exactly why it happened. *Women don't let things go*. Not saying the blokes don't share part of the blame. But if the girls hadn't got their knickers in a knot, and that might sound sexist but it's not, it's just a fact of life, ask any man, not some new age, artsy fartsy, I-wear-moisturiser type, I mean a real man, ask a real man, then he'll tell you that women are like the Olympic athletes of grudges. You should see my wife in action. And she's not even the worst of them.

Miss Barnes: Helicopter parents. Before I started at Pirri-wee Public, I thought it was an exaggeration, this thing about parents being overly involved with their kids. I mean, my mum and dad loved me, they were like *interested* in me, when I was growing up in the nineties, but they weren't like *obsessed* with me.

Mrs Lipmann: It's a tragedy, and deeply regrettable, and we're all trying to move forward. I have no further comment.

Carol: I blame the Erotic Book Club. But that's just me.

Jonathan: There was nothing erotic about the Erotic Book Club, I'll tell you that for free.

Jackie: You know what? I see this as a feminist issue.

Harper: Who said it was a feminist issue? What the heck? I'll tell you what started it. The *incident* at the kindergarten orientation day.

Graeme: My understanding was that it all comes back to the stay-at-home mums battling it out with the career mums. What do they call it? The Mummy Wars.

My wife wasn't involved. She doesn't have time for that sort of thing.

Thea: You journalists are just loving the French nanny angle. I heard someone on the radio today talking about the 'French maid', which Juliette was certainly not. Renata had a housekeeper as well. Lucky for some. I have four children, and no 'staff' to help out! Of course, I don't have a problem *per se* with working mothers, I just wonder why they bothered having children in the first place.

Melissa: You know what I think got everyone all hot and bothered? The head lice. Oh my gosh, don't let me get started on the head lice.

Samantha: The head lice? What did that have to do with anything? Who told you that? I bet it was Melissa, right? That

poor girl suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome after her kids kept getting re-infected. Sorry. It's not funny. It's not funny at all.'

Detective Sergeant Adrian Quinlan: Let me be clear. This is not a circus. This is a murder investigation.

## Chapter Two

*Six months before the trivia night*

Forty. Madeline Martha Mackenzie was forty years old today.

‘I am forty,’ she said out loud as she drove. She drew the word out in slow motion like a sound effect. ‘*Foorty.*’

She caught the eye of her daughter in the rear vision mirror. Chloe grinned and imitated her mother. ‘I am five. *Fiiive.*’

‘Forty!’ trilled Madeline like an opera singer. ‘Tra la la la!’

‘Five!’ trilled Chloe.

Madeline tried a rap version, beating out the rhythm on the steering wheel. ‘I’m forty, yeah forty –’

‘That’s enough now, Mummy,’ said Chloe firmly.

‘Sorry,’ said Madeline.

She was taking Chloe to her kindergarten – ‘Let’s Get Kindy Ready!’ – orientation. Not that Chloe required any orientation before starting school next January. She was already very firmly oriented at Pirriwee Public. At this morning’s drop-off Chloe had been busy taking charge of her brother Fred, who was two years older, but often seemed younger. ‘Fred, you forgot to put your book bag in the basket! That’s it. In there. Good boy.’

Fred had obediently dropped his book bag in the appropriate basket before running off to put Jackson in a headlock. Madeline had pretended not to see the headlock. Jackson probably deserved it. Jackson’s mother, Renata, hadn’t seen it

either because she was deep in conversation with Harper, both of them frowning earnestly over the stress of educating their gifted children. Renata and Harper attended the same weekly support group for parents of gifted children. Madeline imagined them all sitting in a circle wringing their hands while their eyes shone with secret pride.

While Chloe was busy bossing the other children around at orientation (her gift was bossiness, she was going to run a corporation one day), Madeline was going to have coffee and cake with her friend Celeste. Celeste's twin boys were starting school next year too, so they'd be running amok at orientation. (Their gift was shouting. Madeline had a headache after five minutes in their company.) Celeste always bought exquisite and very expensive birthday presents, so that would be nice. After that, Madeline was going to drop Chloe off with her mother-in-law, and then have lunch with some friends before they all rushed off for school pick-up. The sun was shining. She was wearing her gorgeous new Dolce and Gabbana stilettos (bought online, thirty percent off.) It was going to be a lovely, lovely day.

'Let the Festival of Madeline begin!' her husband Ed had said this morning when he brought her coffee in bed. Madeline was famous for her fondness of birthdays and celebrations of all kind. Any excuse for champagne.

Still. Forty.

As she drove the familiar route to the school, she considered her magnificent new age. Forty. She could still feel 'forty' the way it felt when she was fifteen. Such a colourless age. Marooned in the middle of your life. Nothing would matter all that much when you were forty. You wouldn't have real feelings when you were forty, because you'd be safely cushioned by your frumpy forty-ness.

*'Forty-year-old woman found dead.'* Oh dear.

*'Twenty-year-old woman found dead.'* Tragedy! Sadness! Find that murderer!

Madeline always had to do a minor shift in her head when she heard something on the news about a woman dying in her forties. But, wait, that could be me! That would be sad! People would be sad if I was dead! Devastated even. So there, age-obsessed world. I might be forty, but I am cherished.

On the other hand, it was probably perfectly natural to feel sadder over the death of a twenty year old than a forty year old. The forty year old had enjoyed twenty years more of life. That's why, if there was a gunman on the loose, Madeline would feel obligated to throw her middle-aged self in front of the twenty year old. Take a bullet for youth. It was only fair.

Well, she would if she could be sure it was a nice young person. Not one of those insufferable ones, like the child driving the little blue Mitsubishi in front of Madeline. She wasn't even bothering to hide the fact that she was using her mobile phone while she drove, probably texting or updating her Facebook status.

See! This kid wouldn't have even noticed the loose gunman! She would have been staring vacantly at her phone, while Madeline sacrificed her life for her! It was infuriating.

The little car with the 'P-Plate' stuck at a jaunty angle on the back window, appeared to be jammed with young people. At least three in the back: their heads bobbing about, hands gesticulating. Was that somebody's foot waving about? It was a tragedy waiting to happen. They all needed to concentrate. Just last week, Madeline had been having a quick coffee after her 'Shock-Wave' class, and reading a story in the paper about how all the young people were killing themselves sending texts while they drove. *On my way. Nearly there!* These were



their last, foolish (often misspelled) words. Madeline had cried over the picture of one teenager's grief-stricken mother, absurdly holding up her daughter's mobile phone to the camera as a warning to readers.

'Silly little idiots,' she said out loud, as the car weaved dangerously close into the next lane.

'Who is an idiot?' said her daughter, Chloe, from the back seat.

'The girl driving the car in front of me is an idiot because she's driving her car and using her phone at the same time.'

'Like when you need to call Daddy when we're running late,' said Chloe.

'I only did that one time!' protested Madeline. 'And I was very careful and very quick! And I'm *forty* years old!'

'Today,' said Chloe knowledgeably. 'You're forty years old today.'

'Yes! Also, I made a quick call, I didn't send a text! You have to take your eyes off the road to text. Texting is illegal and naughty and you must promise to never, ever do it when you're a teenager.'

Her voice quivered at the thought of Chloe being a teenager and driving a car.

'But you're allowed to make a quick phone call,' checked Chloe.

'No! That's illegal too.'

'So that means you broke the law,' said Chloe with satisfaction. 'Like a *robber*.'

Chloe was currently in love with the idea of robbers. She was definitely going to date bad boys one day. Bad boys on motorbikes.

'Stick with the nice boys, Chloe!' said Madeleine after a moment. 'Like Daddy. Bad boys don't bring you coffee in bed, I'll tell you that for free.'

‘What are you babbling on about, woman?’ sighed Chloe. She’d picked this phrase up from her father, and imitated his weary tone perfectly. They’d made the mistake of laughing the first time she did it, so she’d kept it up, and said it just often enough, and with perfect timing, so that they couldn’t help but keep laughing.

This time Madeline managed not to laugh. Chloe currently trod a very fine line between adorable and obnoxious. Madeline probably trod the same line herself.

Madeline pulled up behind the little blue Mitsubishi at a red light. The young driver was *still* looking at her mobile phone. Madeline banged on her car horn. She saw the driver look in her rear vision mirror, while all her passengers craned around to look.

‘Put down your phone!’ she yelled. She mimicked texting by jabbing her finger in her palm. ‘It’s illegal! It’s dangerous!’

The girl stuck her finger up in the classic up yours gesture.

‘Right!’ Madeline pulled on her handbrake and put on her hazard lights.

‘What are you doing?’ said Chloe.

Madeline undid her seatbelt and threw open the car door.

‘But we’ve got to go to orientation!’ said Chloe in a panic. ‘We’ll be late! Oh, *calamity!*’

‘Oh, calamity,’ was a line from a children’s book that they used to read to Fred when he was little. The whole family said it now. Even Madeline’s parents had picked it up and some of Madeline’s friends. It was a very contagious phrase.

‘It’s all right,’ said Madeline. ‘This will only take a second. I’m saving young lives.’

She stalked up to the girl’s car on her new stilettos and banged on the window.

The window slid down and the driver metamorphosed from a shadowy silhouette into a real young girl with white skin, a sparkly nose ring and badly applied, clumpy mascara.

She looked up at Madeline with a mixture of aggression and fear. 'What is your *problem?*' Her mobile phone was still held casually in her left hand.

'Put down that phone! You could kill yourself and your friends!' Madeleine used the exact same tone she used on Chloe when she was being extremely naughty. She reached in the car, grabbed the phone and tossed it to the open-mouthed girl in the passenger seat. 'OK? Just stop it!'

She could hear their gales of laughter as she walked back to the car. She didn't care. She felt pleasantly stimulated. A car pulled up behind hers. Madeline lifted her hand apologetically and hurried back to her car before the lights changed.

Her ankle turned. One second it was doing what an ankle was meant to do and the next it was flipping out at a sickeningly wrong angle. She fell heavily, on one side. Oh calamity.

\*

That was almost certainly the moment the story began.

With the ungainly flip of an ankle.

## Chapter Three

Jane pulled up at a red light behind a big shiny SUV with its hazard lights blinking and watched a dark-haired woman hurry along the side of the road back to her car. She wore a floaty blue summer dress and high strappy heels and she smiled and waved apologetically, charmingly, at Jane. The morning sun caught one of her earrings and it shone as if she'd been touched by something celestial.

A glittery girl. Older than Jane but definitely still glittery. All her life Jane had watched girls like that with scientific interest. Maybe a little awe. Maybe a little envy. They weren't necessarily the prettiest, but they decorated themselves so affectionately, like Christmas trees, with dangling earrings, jangling bangles and delicate, pointless scarves. They touched your arm a lot when they spoke. Jane's best friend at school had been a glittery girl. Jane had a weakness for them.

Then the woman fell, as if something had been pulled out from underneath her.

'Ouch,' said Jane, and she looked away fast, to save the woman's dignity.

'Did you hurt yourself, Mummy?' asked Ziggy from the back seat. He was always very worried about her hurting herself.

'No,' said Jane. 'That lady over there hurt herself. She tripped over.'

She waited for the woman to get up and get back in her car, but she was still on the ground. She'd tipped back her head to the sky, and her face had that compressed look of

someone in great pain. The traffic light turned green and a little P-plated car that had been in front of the SUV zoomed off with a squeal of tyres.

Jane put her indicator on to drive around the car. They were on their way to Ziggy's orientation day at the new school, and she had no idea where she was going. She and Ziggy were both nervous and pretending not to be. She wanted to get there in plenty of time.

'Is the lady OK?' said Ziggy.

Jane felt that strange lurch she sometimes experienced when she got distracted by her life and then something (often Ziggy) made her remember just in time the appropriate way for a nice, ordinary, well-mannered grown-up to behave.

If it weren't for Ziggy she would have driven off. She would have been so focused on her goal of getting him to his kindergarten orientation morning she would have *left a woman sitting in the gutter, writhing in pain.*

'I'll just check on her,' said Jane, as if that was her intention all along. She flicked on her own hazard lights and opened the car door, aware as she did of a selfish sense of resistance. *You are an inconvenience, glittery lady!*

'Are you all right?' she called.

'I'm fine!' The woman smiled and tried to sit up straighter, and whimpered, her hand on her ankle. 'Ow. Shit. I've rolled my ankle that's all. I'm such an *idiot*. I got out of the car to go tell the girl in front of me to stop texting. Serves me right for behaving like a school prefect.'

Jane crouched down next to her. The woman had shoulder-length, well-cut dark hair, and the faintest sprinkle of freckles across her nose. There was something aesthetically pleasing about those freckles, like a childhood memory of summer, and they were very nicely complemented by the fine lines around her eyes and the absurd swinging earrings.

Jane's resistance vanished entirely.

She liked this woman. She wanted to help her.

(Although, what did that say? If the woman had been a toothless, warty-nosed crone she would have continued to feel resentful? The injustice of it. The cruelty of it. She was going to be nicer to this woman because she liked her freckles.)

The woman's dress had an intricately embroidered cut-out-pattern of flowers all along the neckline. Jane could see tanned, freckly skin through the petals.

'We need to get some ice on it straight away,' said Jane. She knew about ankle injuries from her netball days and she could see this woman's ankle was already beginning to swell. 'And keep it elevated.'

She chewed her lip, and looked about hopefully for someone else. She had no idea how to handle the logistics of making this actually happen.

'It's my birthday,' said the woman sadly. 'My fortieth.'

'Happy birthday,' said Jane. It was sort of cute that a woman of *forty* would even bother to mention that it was her birthday.

She looked at the woman's strappy shoes. Her toe nails were painted a lustrous turquoise. The stiletto heels were as thin as tooth picks and perilously high.

'No wonder you did your ankle,' said Jane. 'No one could walk in those shoes!'

'I know, but aren't they gorgeous.' The woman turned her foot on an angle to admire them. 'Ouch! *Fuck*, that hurts. Sorry. Excuse my language.'

'Mummy!' A little girl with dark curly hair, wearing a sparkling tiara, stuck her head out the window of the car. 'What are you doing? Get up! We'll be late!'

Glittery mother. Glittery daughter.

‘Thanks for the sympathy, darling!’ said the woman. She smiled ruefully at Jane.

‘We’re on our way to her kindergarten orientation. She’s very excited.’

‘At Pirriwee Public?’ said Jane. She was astonished. ‘But that’s where I’m going. My son Ziggy is starting school next year. We’re moving here in December.’ It didn’t seem possible that she and this woman could have anything in common, or that their lives could intersect in any way.

‘Ziggy! Like Ziggy Stardust? What a great name!’ said the woman. ‘I’m Madeline by the way. Madeline Martha Mackenzie. I always mention the Martha for some reason. Don’t ask me why.’

She held out her hand.

‘Jane,’ said Jane. ‘Jane no middle name Chapman.’

\*

Gabrielle: The school ended up split in two. It was like, I don’t know, a civil war. You were either on Team Madeline or Team Renata.

Bonnie: No, no, that’s awful. That never happened. There were no *sides*. We’re a very close-knit community. There was too much alcohol. Also it was a full moon. Everyone goes a little crazy when it’s a full moon. I’m serious. It’s an actual verifiable phenomenon.

Samantha: Was it a full moon? It was pouring rain, I know that. My hair was all boofy.

Mrs Lipmann: That’s ridiculous and highly defamatory. I have no further comment.

Carol: I know I keep harping on about the Erotic Book Club, but I’m sure something happened at one of their little ‘meetings’, quote, unquote.

Harper: Listen, I *cried* when we learned Emily was gifted. I

thought, here we go again! I'd been through it all before with Sophia, so I knew what I was in for! Renata was in the same boat. *Two* gifted children. Nobody understands the stress. Renata was worried about how Amabella would settle in at school, whether she'd get enough stimulation and so on. So when that child with the ridiculous name, that Ziggy, did what he did, and it was only the orientation morning! Well she was understandably very distressed. That's what started it all.