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Written by Nicola Moriarty

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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The Fifth Letter

NICOLA MORIARTY



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2017

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Set in 13/15.5 pt Garamond Mt Std
Typeset by Penguin Books

B FORMAT ISBN: 978-1-405-92707-9
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-405-92708-6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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Prologue

The first thing you need to know is that I would never, ever actually follow through on these feelings.

Joni's first thought was that she wasn't the right person to find it. It should have been someone else. Maybe Deb. Or Trina. Deb was the straight shooter. She would have just brought it right out into the open. No secrets, no internal monologue trying to decide what to do about it, no panic, no anguish, and definitely no empathy. 'What the hell is this all about?' she would have demanded of the group, probably while brandishing the letter out in front of her like a weapon.

And Trina, she came across as quiet . . . restrained. But she had her moments. Catch her on the right day and, like Deb, she knew how to take charge. But her style differed from Deb's. If she'd found the letter, she would have stared each one of them down, brought them to their knees, made them confess.

Eden would have been just as bad as Joni, though. Maybe worse. She crumbled under pressure; she wouldn't have had a clue what to do. Joni supposed Eden would have simply brought the charred fragments of paper straight to her.

She *could* take it to Deb. Make her deal with it. Put it all in her hands. *But here's the problem*, thought Joni, *how do I know she wasn't the one who wrote it?*

Chapter 1

‘What’s that thing you’re supposed to say at the beginning?’

‘Ah, what do you mean, love?’

‘You know. The thing you’re supposed to say first, before you launch into your whole . . . speech?’

‘Oh. You mean, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned?”’

‘Yes! That’s the one. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned, it’s been – oh, I don’t know, years and years since my last confession . . . Although, can I just say . . . “I was expecting you to sound different.”’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, you know, with a name like O’Reilly. I thought you might have a sweet Irish accent. I just didn’t think you’d sound so . . . Aussie.’

‘Ri-i-ight.’

Joni readjusted her bottom on the flat wooden seat and leaned forward to press her face up against the mesh window. ‘Are you *sure* you’re really Father O’Reilly?’ she asked, her voice coming out a bit muffled due to her mouth being smooshed against the window. God, imagine if she were just about to spill

her guts to some complete random who'd taken up residence in the priest's compartment for a laugh?

'Yes,' came the steady reply. 'Quite confident.'

She leaned back and rested her head against the paneled wall behind her, breathed in the dusty darkness of the small enclosed cubicle. 'What happens if a claustrophobic person wants to confess?' she mused quietly.

'Pardon?'

'Nothing. Never mind.'

Three bars of sunlight filtered through the gaps in the wall to Joni's left, picking up the flecks of dust in the air. She gazed at the gently floating sparkles and felt her body start to relax.

'I suppose I should really get started,' she said.

'If you're ready.'

'I wasn't planning on coming here to talk to you, by the way. I haven't been to church since I was twelve. That was the age Mum and Dad let us all make our own decisions about religion. We were allowed to say we didn't want to come to evening mass on the weekends, just as long as we were doing something worthwhile instead – like homework or a load of washing for Mum, or whatever. So as soon as each one of us hit twelve, one by one, we all stopped, until it was just Mum and Dad, driving down the street in the fading light all by themselves.'

'Sometimes I felt a bit guilty about that. Like, I

wondered if they were lonely. Or if they regretted giving us the choice. I mean, as much as I was starting to doubt the whole ‘existence-of-God thing’ – no offense – I did sometimes miss getting all dressed up and the whole family piling into the car together at twilight and the church would be warm and glowing and there would be those families that you only sort-of knew, because you only ever saw them once a week and if you ran into them anywhere else, they’d be completely out of context. And sometimes, Mum and Dad would take us to Pizza Hut for dinner afterward – and the best part of that was the all-you-can-eat dessert bar with the giant vat of chocolate mousse.

‘Sorry, I’ve gone off on a tangent. Anyway, the point is, I was going to talk to a psychologist. Or a psychiatrist. I never know what the difference is. But then I started ringing around, and they were all either booked out for weeks and weeks, or else they wanted me to go to my GP first and get a referral and get put on a mental health plan or whatever. And I couldn’t really waste that kind of time. Besides, you don’t cost anything, so that’s a bonus.’

‘Um, thank you?’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Not to rush you, love, but did you have something you wanted to confess?’

Joni hesitated, thinking. How was she supposed to

do this? Just come right out and start listing off her transgressions like a sinful shopping list?

I almost cheated on my husband.

I've compromised my own morals in my work.

I've betrayed my friends, I've judged my friends, I've pushed my friends to breaking point.

And now I don't even recognize one of my friends anymore.

I don't even know who she is.

And if I'm honest, I guess I've been lying to myself as well.

'Sort of. Well, yes, a few things, actually. It's just hard to know exactly where to start, you know?'

'I understand. Start at the beginning. My mother always said it's a very good place to start.'

Joni snorted. 'Did you seriously just say that?'

'Yeah, fair call. But come on, work with me here.'

'Okay, okay. The beginning. Well, I could start with the girls' holiday. But you sort of need to know the girls first – the dynamic. Otherwise, you won't be able to help me figure it out.'

'Figure what out?'

'Figure out who wrote the fifth letter. The point is, Father . . . I'm not the only one who's sinned.'

Chapter 2

1993

‘Deborah! . . . Debbie! . . . Deb! . . . Aha!’

Joni took the concrete stairs two at a time to catch up with the tall girl in front of her. When she finally stopped and turned around, Joni grinned up at her. The two of them moved to the side to allow some senior students to push past and join the canteen line at the top of the stairs.

‘You like “Deb” best, then?’ Joni asked.

Deb glared back at her. ‘What do you want?’

‘Come and have lunch with me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, it’s like Mrs. Gamble said, we have a connection.’

‘A connection? Are you high or something? I don’t even know you.’

‘I’m Joni! Joni Camilleri. I’m in your homeroom. Remember, this morning? We found out that we’re both Scorpios and we both have surnames starting with C.’

‘So?’

‘So . . . we’re supposed to . . .’ Joni’s voice faltered. She paused and then tilted forward onto her tiptoes so she could lean in closer to Deb. ‘I don’t have anyone to sit with,’ she said quietly. ‘I don’t know anyone *at all* at this school. No one from my primary school came here. Please, please, just sit with me?’

She pulled back and waited, hid her hand in her pocket, and crossed her fingers. Joni could tell that Deb was the type of person who would easily make friends with the coolest people in the school if she chose to. She was gorgeous in a completely effortless and highly intimidating sort of way. She had a short spiky haircut, sharp, high cheekbones, no makeup, and no jewelry. Somehow, her school uniform seemed to hang off her body in a trendy, uncaring way.

This morning, when Mrs. Gamble had gushed over the fact that four girls in their homeroom all had *C* surnames and were all Scorpios, Joni had known, right there and then, that this was her in. Her chance to form a new circle of friends.

Deborah Camden was the one she had to swing first, though. If she could win Deb over, then she could win anyone.

Deb was still just staring at her, eyes narrowed, jaw set. Then Joni saw it happen. A minute twitch at the edges of Deb’s lips. She huffed, nosily, and said, ‘Oh, okay, fine. But *just* for today.’

Joni immediately brightened and all traces of fear

and loneliness that had been stamped across her face vanished. ‘Yay!’ she said happily. ‘Come with me, we’ll find the others first.’

‘The others?’ Deb asked as she followed Joni back down the steps and away from the canteen. ‘Um, excuse me, *the others?*’ she repeated when Joni didn’t reply.

‘Yes! The others,’ sang Joni.

They found Trina waiting on the side of the basketball court. She had a grim look of concentration on her face as she watched the girls play, her shiny black hair scraped back into a tight ponytail.

‘Trina!’ said Joni, nudging her with her elbow to get her attention. ‘Short for Katrina, right?’ she asked.

Trina glanced sideways at Joni. ‘Nope. Just Trina,’ she said, before turning her attention back to the game, her eyes trained on the ball. ‘That girl should have passed by now, total ball hog,’ she muttered under her breath.

‘Really?!’ continued Joni, ignoring Trina’s mutterings. ‘Just Trina. So like, it says Trina on your birth certificate and everything?’

Trina kept her attention fixed on the play. ‘Yep. My mum liked it that way.’

‘That’s cool.’

‘Uh, thanks.’

‘Anyway, Deb and I want you to come and sit with us.’

Trina took her eyes off the court once more. She glanced at Joni and then at Deb. Joni realized that Deb was just kind of glaring back at Trina, so she tried to spread her welcoming smile even wider – although her cheeks were actually starting to hurt.

‘Uh . . . why?’ asked Trina.

‘Wasn’t anyone listening this morning in home-room?’ asked Joni, ‘Your surname, Chan. Is that Chinese, by the way? Or Korean? Never mind, doesn’t matter. Anyway, the point is, it starts with a *C*.’

‘It’s Chinese,’ replied Trina. ‘But I’m Australian, I was born here in Australia,’ she added, sounding a little defensive. ‘But so what, it starts with a *C*, what does that have to do with anything?’

‘Your surname starts with a *C* and you’re a Scorpio! Same as Deb and me. So we’re supposed to be friends. You have to come sit with us.’

‘Oh, well, but I’m just waiting to get called on,’ said Trina, waving her hand at the game.

Joni could feel Deb’s patience wavering. She thought fast and then said firmly, ‘They won’t, though, I heard two girls in the bathroom earlier. They were making fun of all the people who wait on the sideline hoping to play. They said they were just going to leave them waiting there forever, pretending like eventually they would call you on but never actually do it.’

‘Seriously?’ asked Trina.

‘Uh-huh,’ said Joni.

At that moment the ball bounced toward them and then rolled to a stop at Trina's feet. Joni and Deb watched as Trina reached down to pick it up and stared at it in her hands for a few seconds. 'Screw them,' she said, and then she hurled the ball toward the hoop before turning away to join Joni and Deb. Joni watched over Trina's shoulder as the ball swished neatly through the net and hoped that Trina would forgive her if she ever found out that she had just lied to her.

It wasn't until the last five minutes of lunch that the three of them finally found Eden, wandering up and down the aisles of the library, examining the books with careful consideration, moving slowly, running her fingers along the spines. She was the shortest of the four of them, and her petite face looked almost comical under the large mess of frizzy blond hair.

Joni was feeling exasperated when she spotted her. As though Eden ought to have known that they'd be looking for her. When Joni suggested that Eden leave the library and come and sit with them – all simply because her surname was Chester and her birthday was in early November – Eden just shrugged and nodded, as though that made perfect sense.

The conversation between the four twelve-year-old girls was a bit stilted, with Joni trying to lead them. Asking questions like she was an interviewer on a chat

show. At the end of lunch, she instructed them all to meet back again tomorrow at recess at the same silver benches.

Eden complied happily. Deb offered a terse, 'Maybe,' and Trina gave a half laugh before agreeing to join them.

Years later, Joni had asked Eden whether or not she would have ever ventured out of that library had they not come and rescued her. 'Oh no,' Eden had replied, 'My plan was to keep myself busy by trying to read every single book in the library by the time I finished high school. I was going to learn new languages, teach myself chemistry, learn how to play the saxophone. Stuff like that.'

'I don't know if you can really learn all that stuff from books alone. But you were glad, right? That we did find you?'

'Well. I was a bit disappointed that I never did learn French, but yes. I was glad.'

In fact, I don't even know why I have these thoughts.