

DARK WARNING

Also by Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick

Timecatcher

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*To the memory of my darling gran, Dote O' Neill, who told me
many, many stories, including that of Billy.*

1

I was about four when I saw Matt Davern's spaniel bite John Reilly's hand. Nothing strange in that 'cept I saw that dog bite John Reilly a full five minutes before John Reilly even reached out to pat the cross old thing.

'I saw,' I said to Da as we went home later, me high on his shoulders looking down at all the world.

'Saw what, lovey?' Da smiled up at me as we wended between the carts and stalls of Smithfield Market towards Missus Kenny's lodging house.

'Saw Matt Davern's spaniel bite John Reilly,' I replied, watching feathers float by on passing hats and women hitching their long petticoats to stop them sweeping the dirty cobbles.

'Sure an' we all saw that, Taney girl.' Da laughed. 'And half o' Dublin heard John Reilly roar!'

'But I saw it two times, Da,' I said proudly.

Da stopped walking. 'What d'you mean, lovey?' His voice was slow and careful. 'What d'you mean, Taney?' he asked again.

'Saw the dog bite John Reilly before it bited him,' I said, a little unsure of myself now.

‘I see,’ Da said.

‘Have I been bad, Da?’ I could feel my lower lip quivering. Da’s voice was strange, not like Da’s at all.

I tried to peer around his head to see his face and he patted my leg. ‘No, lovey, you haven’t been bad.’ He began to walk again and I had to lean back and hold on. ‘You’ll tell me any time that happens, won’t you, Taney?’

I told him I would. I promised.

It didn’t happen again till when I was maybe six or thereabouts. We were in the market and Da was haggling with a trader over a bushel of carrots. I pulled at his coat tails to get his attention.

‘Jenna Mooney’s going to tear her petticoat and make the fish fall about,’ I said, pointing at the small yellow-haired girl running through the stalls.

The root seller raised his eyebrows and Da half-smiled. We three watched the girl run past the long row of milking cows, the cabbage man, the costermonger and the orange seller. As she passed the fishmonger the tail of her brown petticoat snagged on the broken reeds of a battered basket. She yanked herself free and the basket spun out from the display causing more baskets to tilt and lots of fish to flop and slap onto the cobbles. The fishmonger swore and Jenna Mooney took one look at what she’d done and scarpered down Duck Lane.

I giggled and looked up at Da. His face had turned pale.

‘Well, I’ll be . . .’ the root man was saying, laughing loudly as he watched the monger slide about in his wares, trying to set things to rights. ‘An’ how did yer young one make that happen, then?’

‘She didn’t,’ Da snapped, grabbing my hand and moving us away from the stall.

‘Da?’ I said, running to keep up with his long strides. ‘Please, Da, you’re going too fast an’ you’re hurting me hand.’ He slowed down but didn’t look at me.

‘D-Da?’ I began to whimper.

He stopped then, knelt down and pulled me into his arms. I sobbed into his shoulder. ‘I didn’t make it happen, Da,’ I hiccupped. ‘I just saw it in me head, Da. I just saw it and then it happened, I swear.’

He nodded and smiled but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

‘Couldn’t help it, Da,’ I said.

He nodded again. ‘I know, lovey.’ He stood up and tossed my curly hair with his big hand. ‘I’d just rather ...’ He sighed. ‘It doesn’t matter. Forget about it, lovey.’

But I couldn’t forget the look on Da’s face that day. So when I knew Mick Bryson would slip in dung in Thundercut Alley a whole day before it happened, I didn’t tell Da. I felt awful afterwards ’cause Mick Bryson hurt his ankle so bad he couldn’t work for a month and I could have stopped him comin’ a cropper if I’d only said what I’d seen.

I never said when I knew Missus Mooney’s new baby was going to get took by measles, and it would have made no differ if I had.

I never said anything the time I knew a horse would go crazy in the square and knock hawkers and gawkers and stalls about before trying to jump over the milk cart and breaking its front legs. I never said nowt, but I made sure I wasn’t about that day to hear its screams.

I never said nowt and eventually Da stopped watching me with a worried frown on his face. And he stopped asking if I ever saw anything strange, like that time I'd seen Matt Davern's spaniel bite John Reilly's hand.

It was the Misses Davies who told me about my mother. My mother was dead and gone and me only a baby, so I couldn't remember her. Da never talked about her, not to me. The two Misses Davies often did; that's why I liked to go downstairs to visit with them. That, and their rooms smelled of lavender and rose water while most of the world smelled of boiled cabbage and sweat.

The Misses Davies had the best rooms in Missus Kenny's house, the whole floor above the shop, with the front rooms facing out onto Smithfield Square. Their rooms were full of lovely things and never hung about with wet clothes like ours were. There was a handsome sofa with curly arms and legs, and some upright chairs, three little walnut tables all tucked one inside the other, and a dresser full of fancy silver dishes and little porcelain statues of milkmaids and shepherds. More bits and pieces than you could shake a stick at, there was.

No one else in our lodging house owned much; near all of the furniture in every other room belonged to Missus Kenny. The Misses Davies were old ladies, as much as fifty year old even, but they were elegant and fine. They always had lace at their throats and wrists and their hair caught up with many clips and pins. They were the grandest ladies I knew. They drank tea on Friday afternoons and would invite me to join them. They were fond of company, the Misses Davies, but

they didn't seem to know many folk so they made do with Missus Kenny and me.

I liked to look at the beautiful things in the Misses Davies' rooms, to sit on the embroidered footstool, to rub my bare feet in the Turkish rug, and take tea from a china cup. Tea! We never had tea, me and Da and Mary Kate and Jon Jon. I wasn't sure I really liked the taste of it but Miss Evelyn let me put lots of honey in.

'Your mother was a true beauty,' the two Misses Davies would say. 'All that lovely red hair, just like yours.'

'And those extraordinary grey eyes,' Miss Evelyn Davies would say in her posh voice. 'Like autumn clouds.'

'You have your mother's eyes,' Miss Ruth would add. 'Though yours are slightly paler and larger, I think.'

'Your mother's eyes,' they'd say again, glancing at each other. Then they'd stare at me, like they wanted to ask something but weren't sure iffen they should. Sometimes Miss Ruth would clear her throat and start to speak but Miss Evelyn would frown slightly and that'd be that.

'Go on, then, ask me,' I said one day when I couldn't stand it no longer. 'I don't mind, whatever it is. Ask.'

Miss Evelyn slopped her tea as she put the cup back into the saucer, and Miss Ruth hid her mouth behind her handkerchief.

'Can it be?' Miss Ruth whispered. 'Has she read our thoughts? Has she . . . has she—?'

'Got her dear mama's gift?' Miss Evelyn clutched at her sister's arm.

'My mother had a gift?' I frowned. 'What d'you mean?'

‘Your mama had a gift, a talent,’ Miss Evelyn explained. ‘Some people are born to paint wonderful pictures; some naturally have splendid singing voices. Your mother — well — she had a rather unusual talent.’ She looked quickly at her sister. ‘But maybe we shouldn’t speak of this.’

‘Please, Miss Evelyn,’ I begged, anxious not to lose this chance to learn more about my mother. By now my face must have looked all question, just like theirs. Even Horace, the Misses Davies’ grumpy old cat, looked kind of curious. ‘She was my mam,’ I said, digging my dirty toes into the carpet, my fingers into the cushion I was sat on. ‘I have a right to know about her, I do.’

Miss Evelyn put a finger to her lips and Miss Ruth took the lace hankie away from hers.

‘Evelyn,’ she began. ‘Don’t you think perhaps . . .’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Perhaps?’

‘Yes.’

‘We should?’ Miss Ruth said, uncertain.

‘Yes.’ Miss Evelyn nodded and they both put their hands into their laps.

By now I wanted to shout at them, ‘Tell me, tell me!’ but I held my tongue for fear they’d change their minds and not tell me at all. I suddenly knew just what they were going to say but I needed to hear them say it out loud.

‘Your mother,’ Miss Evelyn began. ‘Your mother, she—’

‘Your mother saw things before they happened,’ Miss Ruth blurted out, then drew her hankie over her mouth again.

‘She had the gift of second sight,’ Miss Evelyn said. ‘She

knew things about people, accidents that might befall them, good fortune that might be on its way.’

‘Whether their next child would be a girl or a boy.’

‘When they might meet their true love.’ They both giggled and two hankies fluttered. ‘She read our tea leaves for us every month.’

‘Read your tea leaves?’ I’d never heard of such a thing.

‘We would pour ourselves a cup of tea, then drink it,’ Miss Ruth explained eagerly, picking up her cup as she spoke.

‘Then Ella, your mama, would look at the pattern that the leaves left in the cup,’ Miss Evelyn said, ‘and tell us what she saw in store for us there. Trifles, mainly. When Horace was just a kitten she said he’d go missing for a day or so but all would be well and he would return. And once when Ruth lost a pearl earring, Ella said it was fallen between the floorboards. And she could always foretell when we should expect a visit from an old friend.’

‘And,’ Miss Ruth lifted her cup to her lips and drained it, ‘she was always right.’

‘Always.’ Miss Evelyn nodded and drank her tea.

They put down their cups and slid them towards me across the table. I looked at the mess of leaves in the little bowls.

Horace will have a fight with the biggest of the distillery cats, I thought. He’ll lose a piece of his ear and get real sick. I drew my head back. I thought of Da’s face that day in the market when I’d said that Jenna Mooney’d knock over the fish baskets.

‘I can’t do it,’ I said, and shook my head. ‘Tea leaves is just tea leaves to me.’

Their faces fell. They looked so disappointed I almost took it back. But what was the use of telling them about Horace? There's no stopping a cat fighting when it chooses.

'Never mind, my dear,' Miss Evelyn said, withdrawing her cup and smiling. 'It was so entertaining whenever your mother consented to read our leaves for us but I think her gifts weighed heavy on her in the end.'

Miss Ruth nodded her head and sighed. 'Perhaps you shouldn't mention to your father that we told you?' The two ladies looked at me anxiously.

I assured them I wouldn't say a word, but I got them to tell me more about my mother's gift every time I came to call. I never tired of hearing the Misses Davies say how my hair was just like my mam's and how my eyes were near as grey. I never tired of hearing how she'd read their cups and how she'd seen things that hadn't happened yet. Second sight, they called it; I had a name for it now.

I went on hiding it from me da but I stopped trying to push it away. I stopped thinking it was bad now I knew it came from my mother. As I got older I began to hear whispers from other folk about Ella Tyrell's gift. It seems some folk blamed her for it and some admired her for it, but I don't suppose she could help it either way.

And me. I couldn't help it neither.