

MARIE TIERNEY

'Mesmerising'

Peter James

'Exceptional'

Chris Whitaker

'Beautiful'

Belinda Bauer



Ava is just
thirteen when

she finds the
first body

Deadly Animals

'A crime novel I wish I had written'

Lynda La Plante

MARIE TIERNEY



Deadly
Animals

ZAFFRE

To my husband, Steve, and my son, Joe

There is never only one, of anyone.

Margaret Atwood

Cat's Eye

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PART ONE

Chapter One

Mid-May 1981, Rubery, South Birmingham

WHEN EVERYTHING WAS DRENCHED IN sleep, Ava knew it was time. She eased out of bed and, when her feet touched the floor, she became still. No stirring from her younger sisters in their bunks – only soft snores. The trick at night was to banish all thoughts and let instincts govern. She must be stealthy and quick: the Small Hours were called small with good reason – especially as dawn approached. The dark was not absolute, only monochrome, though the night was her ally, and never harmed her.

Her pupils were matt black and massive in the gloom. She cocked her head to one side and listened. Only the tick-tock of the clock. Her mother was sound asleep in her room at the end of the hall. Ava was the only thing awake.

She padded to the front door. She reached for her coat but did not put it on: the polyester lining rustled too much. No shoes: shoes were inflexible, rowdy. She tucked her pyjama trousers into her sock tops. Thick socks lent silence to movement. After thumbing the latch off, she gradually pulled open the door.

Cold air nuzzled without bite as she stepped out onto the communal gallery. She tucked a wad of tissue paper between the door and the frame. Although the latch was on, Ava couldn't risk either being discovered or being locked out. No moon, no mist: the ground dry as burned bone. Somewhere far away, a dog barked its warning to an unseen intruder. Ava's nose twitched – petrol, earth, stone. Her skin prickled and her belly quivered with anticipation and the excitement of being out alone in the dark.

The apartment block hunkered in its trench, and faced the looming bulk of the Quarry. She scurried along to the central stairwell, which stank of ciggies and chip fat as concrete steps ascended and descended into blackness. She didn't consider the noisy elevator. Ava swung her coat on, felt in her pocket for her blue pencil sharpened at both ends, retrieved her Red Book from behind the huge metal bin and exited the open foyer. She swept

into the laburnum bushes that hugged the low wall of the property then stepped forward into the gap with a view of the street, silent as an abandoned film set. The street lights tipped everything in a pallid glow, and a strange peace wavered in it.

Ava surveyed the realm: no people, no animals. She straddled the wall, crouched, then ran for the sanctuary of the red telephone box on the corner of the next street. She pulled her hood over her face. She was darkness against darkness, therefore invisible.

Ava scampered to the dun maisonettes, to the last building in the row, which was a burned-out shell after a major fire the year before. It was supposed to be demolished but it still stood, its scorched walls buttressed by scaffolding, its immediate perimeter protected by a high wooden fence. Kids avoided it because they thought it was haunted and grown-ups avoided it because it was unsafe. There was a gap in the fence closest to where the communal front door used to be, and Ava squeezed through. She dashed through its hollow bulk to the backyard, which smelled of mulch and a milder version of the stink that had been permeating the district over the last week. There was a tiny patch of balding lawn framed by untidy heaps of rubble and swept ash. The orange lights from the A38 metres away illuminated the garden in sepia tones.

In the earth, she could make out a crescent shape made of twigs, widely spaced, some aligned with an object: a small cardboard box, a piece of wood, a metal bowl. Each thing covered or partially covered the remains of dead animals. Those carcasses, uncovered, were left open to the whim of the elements. A few years ago, Ava had created a secret roadkill body farm to feed her curiosity about dead things. It was both cemetery and laboratory and this patch of it was the only site enclosed, because if local children crunched through bones suspiciously batched in one small area with lollypop-stick tags then there would be an uproar. Therefore it was sprawled across the estate, arranged as if the dead animals had died in their places naturally and Ava would visit each subject once a week then record her findings in her Red Book. She noted how flesh decomposed in water, how much faster it decomposed in air, how much slower in earth; if temperature slowed it down or exacerbated the process; if corpses decomposed quicker beneath concrete slabs, in boxes; the effect of weathering and what time insect activity took place, the roles insects played in breaking down the corpses to skeletons. At the end of each study: she said *The Rabbit's Prayer* from *Watership Down* because she believed it was the only invocation good

enough. She thanked them then buried them properly so they could rest in peace.

Here, her experiments were more concentrated and in total privacy. She flitted to each twig, like a moth collecting macabre nectar, lifted each object to study what lay beneath and record its progress. She had never observed how death behaved at night, and she was taking this opportunity to do just that, in the quiet stillness, while the occasional car zoomed past on the road nearby, her back to the light so she could quickly note her findings with her blue pencil in her Red Book.

A few weeks before, she'd found a dead adder on the Quarry. She'd never had a reptile specimen for her observations before so she'd placed it in her strange laboratory. In open air, and over the weeks, the snake's skin had flaked and blown away, and its form had eventually skeletonised. It glowed like a barbed Möbius strip carved in ivory.

Having completed the task in the garden, knowing she would have to return to bury her subjects properly in daylight, Ava decided to view her prize specimen and it was only a few feet away. She darted into bramble bushes, whose thorns tore skinny spite lines on her hands. She peeked out at the dip and rise of the embankment on which the big road bellowed. She could smell exhaust, and the malodour of rotting meat. She was close to the hidden place she'd found last autumn, situated in a place no kids went because why would they? It was in the corner of the embankment that met the fence of the maisonette's abandoned garden and concealed by a snarl of brambles beneath the roar of the road. It was a good place to conceal things and was the reason why she'd risked so much to see her latest find.

She was alert to subtle pressure changes; a reminder to beware. She reached into her pocket for the sharp blue pencil, and it reassured her. The cluster of psychiatric hospitals around had mythical maniacs escaping all the time. Just because there were no people around didn't mean there were no people around. She didn't feel watched, however: there was no familiar weight of judgement on her back.

And Ava wasn't afraid, as it was impossible for her subjects to harm her. Because they were, after all, dead.

The Flyover murdered animals every day as did its feeder road, the Bristol Road South. Pets and wildlife alike were victims of the ceaseless, grinding traffic: metal monsters spat furry corpses either side, much too fast to eat them properly. Some of them died right before the horrified eyes of pedestrians, others more out than in. Ava used to cry when she came across the mangled remains but now her natural inquisitiveness trumped any childish sentiment left.

Over the past few months, the kills were fewer. Ava doubted it was because the road ran less traffic – if anything it had increased. Sometimes, there'd be evidence of a little death here and there – bloodstains or fur swatches – but the bodies were missing. It was why her latest find had become so important.

She'd discovered it two weeks ago, and it was her largest so far: a male fox (*vulpes vulpes* – 170 bones, 42 teeth), flung intact over the embankment, and hadn't been dead long by the time Ava found it.

She bolted for the corner, kept her head down, careful not to show her pale face under the florid lights. She ducked beneath the natural arch created by branches and found the fox just where she'd left him; stretched out on the hard-packed earth as if lazing in sunshine. The stench was solid, almost touchable. She frowned. There'd been warmer days the previous week but not enough heat to generate such explosive ferocity. The fox was the largest creature she'd ever found but the smell was too *immense* to emanate from its sunken shell.

Ava observed that brown cocoons left by maggots after each moult littered the earth like bullet shells. There was desiccation around its head and limbs, and hide moths and beetles paraded in the split seams. There were too many green bottle flies: the cold made them slow but they were too numerous for night or for a cadaver this advanced with decay. Gem-bright *Lucilia caesar* weren't interested in mummified remains, and preferred juicier feasts for their babies. *Something wasn't right.*

Ava adjusted her position to avoid cramp in her legs, and it was then she was accosted by the full wave of putrescence. Her eyes, now accustomed to the gloom, followed the sordid march of sexton and rove beetles towards their manna from heaven. Her gaze crept further on, and then she saw him.

Mickey Grant.

Fourteen-year-old Mickey Grant had been missing for a fortnight. His school photograph had been on every news programme every day, local and nationwide. He'd vanished so utterly it was as if he'd popped out of existence. He might have run away because sometimes teenage boys ran away. It was possible he might be with family in a foreign land. After all, grown-ups said, it was rare for *boys* to be abducted: it was girls who were usually fiend's fare but nobody had seen Mickey since Deelands Hall disco two Fridays ago. Ava knew him as an unpleasant boy, a bully you couldn't walk past without him saying something spiteful. When he went missing, Ava hadn't cared.

But Mickey wasn't running and he wasn't safe with a far-off relative. He was dead. Slumped like a thrown scarecrow: a writhing slope of maggots that undulated in blubbery waves as they rose to breathe before plunging down into the stinking recesses. Viscous juice oozed into the drip-zone beneath. The once blond hair was patchy with despicable fluids.

Ava wasn't scared. She wasn't a girl who screamed even when hit, yet she sought inside for panic, terror or disgust and found nothing but useless pity. She took mental photographs, recorded the entire scene for her Red Book. He *hadn't* been in this space two weeks ago. This wasn't the kill-site, this was recent waste disposal.

Putrefaction had advanced, though Ava judged him to have been kept in a relatively cool place for a while before, but she'd no experience with such big furless animals. She wished she had a torch. Ava shifted position, out of the stench corridor: rotting flesh was a heavy scent that could be carried home on clothes and hair. She wouldn't be able to disguise it with a spray of Mom's Tweed.

She could just make out familiar circular wounds etched along his forearm: human bite marks. Murder stained below and tainted above. Mickey Grant was carrion, as much so as the fox lying a few feet away, and all three shared a grim tableau. His parents would be devastated, and they seemed such nice people on telly. He'd been dumped here on purpose, as if whoever had murdered him had known the den was there, as if tipped as an ideal hiding place for the worst of secrets. Dead things were heavy and unhelpful when it came to changing their location. Ava scanned her surroundings: there was nowhere for a killer to hide on the grassy embankment.

Even though her common sense told her that the killer was long gone and not likely to be watching a girl out in the night on her own when she shouldn't be, it was time to go.

Quickly, Ava said The Rabbit's Prayer over the animal and to Mickey's ruined face. She remembered good things about him: how he used to stroke every cat in the street, and smiling when he walked his dog, Starsky. She backed out of the hollow.

Ava scuffed her footprints with a twig. Footprints were bad news even if her feet were small for a thirteen-year-old, and there were a great many thirteen-year-olds in the world. She fled the den, and adrenaline ensured she thought of nothing else until she took a breath behind the telephone box. Nine-nine-nine calls were free, and if she disguised her voice nobody would ever know a girl had found the missing boy. Ava didn't *have* to call the police

but she *did* have to: it was only right. The kiosk was brightly lit and she risked being seen, but it faced away from the road so, if she was quick, she could be back in bed in minutes. Ava swung the heavy door open on its leather hinges, grabbed the clunky receiver and rang 999 before she changed her mind. She'd no idea which Voice would arrive out of her mouth but when the operator at the other end said, 'Emergency Services. How can I help?' it was Mrs Poshy-Snob who spoke up.

'Hello? Yes! The police please – *immediately*. Mickey Grant, the *missing* boy, is lying in bushes on the embankment of *Rubery Flyover*.' Mrs Poshy-Snob was a woman with a low voice, flawless diction, and took no nonsense. 'At the rear of the *abandoned* garden off *Homemead Grove*.'

There was a pause then the controller said, 'Do you need an ambulance as well, Mrs . . . ?'

'An *ambulance*? No, dearie! He's *dead*.'

'Er . . . Who are you?'

'*Please* be quick. His poor *mother* needs to know where he *is*.'

'Is this a joke call, Mrs . . . ?'

'Really? *Do I sound* as if I am joking? *Do I*? At two o'clock in the *morning*? You *sound* like a clever chap so *do* get on. *I* was out walking my dog and I found Mickey Grant.' People were always finding dead bodies whilst walking their dogs: it was like a rule. People were always walking their dogs at stupid times of the night. It was always so on *Police 5*.

Strange, though, how no dogs – or any other opportunistic scavenger – had tugged at Mickey, and those bite marks were human. Ava hung up. Outside her front door, she composed herself, tried to halt the heavy panting so that she could ease back inside and quietly close the door. She'd seen her first dead human body and she was fine; she hadn't vomited or cried. Her heartbeat ticked in time with the hall clock. She removed her socks and rolled them into a ball. She would wash then hide them as if tonight's adventure had never been but they smelled of mud and nothing more. She sniffed the skin on her arms and the ends of her hair: just her, not Mickey. She washed her hands quickly in the sink. She couldn't hear sirens and her hope sank. The police weren't coming: they hadn't believed Mrs Poshy-Snob. She was too tired to think about it and she couldn't do anything except crawl into bed and sleep.

Ava had just settled beneath the blankets when Veronica slurred from her cave bunk, 'You smell of winter, Avie.' She rolled over to face the wall.

Ava immediately dropped into slumber, as if from a great height into a woolly void, her body curled around her damp hands, the balled socks at her feet, her breathing regular: her dreams untainted – if she dreamed at all.

Chapter Two

ETH DELAHAYE RESENTED DAYS OFF. It was difficult for him to sit still, to be simply Seth and not detective sergeant. He stood at the window and **S**looked out at the street at night.

His flat was on Wheeley Road. The street had a dark history: in 1959, a young woman, Stephanie Baird, had been mutilated and murdered by Patrick Byrne at a local YWCA hostel, a mansion converted for short-stay accommodation. The murder had shocked the city – not only due to the killer’s blasé, bloodstained escape on a bus but because Stephanie had been decapitated, and a cryptic little note had been found at the scene:

This was the thing I thought would never come.

Byrne was detained eventually, and imprisoned. The building was demolished, and a bland apartment block took its place, with horror now clawed into its foundations. Delahaye doubted its residents were even aware they lived on contaminated ground.

Delahaye loved Birmingham – even its Brutalist city architecture which jostled amongst the great Georgian and Victorian soot-stained buildings. He loved its proud industrial history, and its gruff, honest people with their off-kilter, ironic sense of humour. It was as different from London as London was from Lancaster, his hometown.

In Delahaye’s own tale of three cities, the only one he couldn’t bear to return to was London. Murder was as constant as the flow of the Thames in London, but in Birmingham murder was a staccato event. And somehow more savage when it occurred.

Delahaye sipped a tumbler of Scotch as the Small Faces on the stereo soundtracked his thoughts. Family photographs sat foremost on the mantelpiece, his old boxing trophies tucked behind. On a shelf, among his books, stood his framed graduation certificate from Hendon, alongside a photograph of him and his classmates in their parade uniforms, unsmiling. He’d no idea where most of those faces were now.

He was home but his mind was elsewhere. Being a police officer was a calling and being a detective meant he was an eternal student, always learning on the job in the college of life, where people were tutors who always changed the lesson plan.

It was then his telephone rang.

Chapter Three

ATURDAY WAS *TISWAS* DAY!

It was also Daddy Day. In a brief flash of happy, Ava forgot. When she **S**heard her mother's voice in the kitchen she remembered, as Mickey Grant's decaying face appeared behind her eyes.

Her mother's boyfriend, Trevor, wasn't around. If Trevor had been around last night, Ava would never have dared go out and certainly would never have discovered Mickey. She supposed she should've thought *Poor Mickey* but she didn't. Nor did she think he *deserved* it. After all, Mickey had been fourteen not forty, and would now never get the chance to become a better human.

When Ava walked into the kitchen, her mother said, 'Ava, they've found the missing boy. It's all over the news it is, poor sod.'

Before Ava could respond, the letter box clanked. Half frowning, half smiling (Mom hoped it was Trevor – Ava saw her mother's mind as clearly as a large print Mr Men book), she answered the door. It was one of their neighbours, Susan Shaw, with ciggie in hand, in a dressing gown. Colleen Bonney nattered with Susan about Mickey Grant, and Ava heard men's voices in fore and background, the shutting of doors, the sudden fall to a whisper as Susan said, 'I haven't seen this many police round here since Gail was killed last year, poor babby.' Pregnant teenaged Gail Kinchin had been accidentally shot dead by police as her boyfriend used her as a human shield. It had happened in the next street.

Veronica stood beside Ava and held her hand as Rita ran down the hall, pushed past her sisters, eager to charm whoever was at the door.

'They found him then,' murmured Veronica.

'Hmm,' said Ava. The Passions sang about German film stars from her mother's radio. Next door's doorbell buzzed. Susan stood back, flicked ash, took another drag, and said to someone out of sight, 'Edna's gone out, sweetheart.'

‘Thanks.’ Ava’s ears pricked: a man’s voice with a Northern accent. ‘I’m Detective Sergeant Seth Delahaye – West Midlands Police.’

He stepped into view and showed them his warrant card. The detective was sinewy, as tall as Dad, taller than Trevor: immaculate in a tailored navy suit under a brown leather jacket but the hems of his trousers legs were muddied. There was a walkie-talkie at his hip. Ava sidled closer to pick up his scent and there it was – night-flesh under faded cologne, and not the cheap stuff. He had short thick hair, a prominent Nigel Havers nose, and a well-trimmed moustache. His gaze was direct and not for sale. He was a little older than Colleen, and attractive in a severe, old-fashioned way, out of step with the modern suit. Still, his presence turned Colleen fleetingly pleasant even though attractive evidently wasn’t her type, judging by her infatuation for pug-ugly Trevor.

‘I’d like to ask you a few questions, please, Mrs—?’

‘Bonney,’ said Colleen. She moved her hands so the wedding ring she still wore was visible.

‘And . . . ?’

‘Mrs Shaw,’ said Susan, aware she was in her dressing gown whilst Colleen obliterated in her new sweater and tight jeans.

‘Is this about the Grant lad?’ asked Colleen; all dazzling eye contact, pecking for fresh admiration.

‘Yes,’ said Delahaye.

‘I wouldn’t want to break the news to his mother,’ said Susan.

‘Nor me! You’d have to be hard as nails. You get me?’ Colleen folded her arms. Ava could see that the detective already disliked her mother because Colleen made it seem as if everyone was somehow beneath her.

‘Was he murdered then?’ Susan asked.

‘Ooh, I don’t want to know,’ said Colleen with a fake shudder. Or a real shudder – it was hard to tell.

‘We don’t know at the moment,’ said the detective sergeant. Ava knew there would be a post-mortem. There hadn’t been much left to post-mortem.

‘Who found him then?’ asked Colleen.

‘Somebody out walking their dog,’ said the detective sergeant.

‘It’s always “somebody out walking their dog”, ay?’ said Susan.

Very few people in this area walked their dogs on a lead as most people let their dogs out to foul and fight in the streets. It was why there was so much dog poo around. The detective sergeant asked if the women had known Mickey and both said no. Ava was almost to the open door, Veronica’s hand in hers, shy but not as shy as they used to be.