# SOME

There's your side,

## OFUS

my side,

## ARE

and the truth

# LIARS

### EIONA CUMINS

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ALL OF US ARE BROKEN

## SOME OF US ARE LIARS FIONA CUMMINS

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**EPILOGUE** 

<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>

For Keely Buckle, the sister I never had

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops

And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him

For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,

He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four-foot box, a foot for every year.

— Seamus Heaney, 'Mid-Term Break'

#### PRESS ASSOCIATION (PA) Breaking news

**MIDTOWN-ON-SEA – 18 NOVEMBER 2023** – ESSEX Police has confirmed that an arrest was made this morning following an eleven-month investigation into the murder of one of its officers, Detective Constable Douglas Lynch.

The police officer was found dead at his home in December last year, with his wrists and ankles bound and multiple facial lacerations consistent with a seagull attack. A post-mortem revealed that DC Lynch, who had a phobia of birds, died from heart failure induced by fear.

This is a breaking news story. More to follow.

#### **PROLOGUE**

#### Wednesday, 27 September 2023

Saul

The call came on a sultry night when it seemed as though summer would last forever and winter was a lifetime away.

Saul Anguish was gathering marsh samphire, cutting through the succulent stems with the edge of a blade. A wisp of snipes was wading through the wetlands, their bills probing the mud for insects, the striped crown of their feathers illuminated by the dying rays of sunlight.

It was from a number he didn't recognize, but the young man had been primed to expect it. He placed the vivid stalks into his cloth bag and kicked at the crusted edges of the salt-soaked earth, watching colours bleed from the sky.

The voice was male and authoritative. The last time Saul had heard it was a few weeks earlier, when he'd received a commendation for outstanding bravery from its owner, the Chief Constable of Essex Police.

Lauded for the brilliance of his tactical thinking and his unparalleled courage in saving the life of a young boy, Saul, with few friends and no family to celebrate his success, had slipped away from the ceremony as soon as the official photographs had been taken.

But the Chief Constable had not forgotten the sharp-eyed detective with his gift for policing and the secrets in his heart.

He offered Saul a choice. He did not have to accept the assignment. He understood if it put him in a difficult position among his fellow officers, if going off-book didn't conform to his personal code of ethics, if he was unable to operate alone and under the radar. If lying for the greater good went against his principles. But he'd come highly recommended by his former inspector, whose opinion, despite his fall from grace, was still widely respected.

At twenty-six, Saul was too cynical to believe that choice in this scenario was anything other than illusory. A part of him was surprised by the call, a

forensic trail connecting them both, but he understood that no one rose to such a senior rank without mastering the art of plausible deniability. If he declined, he could kiss goodbye to his promising career. But that wasn't the reason he agreed to the request.

When the Chief Constable had told him that he was authorizing him – unofficially, of course – to quietly investigate a suspected killer operating from inside the force, a bad apple rotting – *infecting* – their revered institution in plain sight, he'd given him a name.

It was a name Saul recognized.

A name that terrified him.

But knowledge was not only power. It was a weapon.

#### **ASSOCIATED PRESS (AP) Advisory notice**

**MIDTOWN-ON-SEA** – **22 JULY 2024** – THE Emmy-Award-winning actress Winter Kellaway will give evidence at Midtown Crown Court this week as part of the gross negligence manslaughter proceedings involving her four-year-old nephew, Teddy Miller.

Witnesses expected to take the stand during the two-week trial include investigating officer Detective Constable Saul Anguish, as well as Jen Miller, Teddy's mother, and the boy's older sister, Iris Miller.

#### NOW Monday, 22 July 2024

Jen

Some days are full of motion. A man on the morning train spills his coffee on her coat and dries it with tissues and overblown apologies. During her dash to St John's for afternoon pick-up, a pre-schooler on a scooter careens into the back of her legs, laddering her almost new tights. When dusk falls, the wind commands the trees to dance, to twist and bend and bow. As she runs hard and fast through the night-time streets, her hair whips around her face and she concentrates on the sound of her footsteps, trying to outpace the past.

Some days are still. *She* is still. Even the act of breathing is an effort, a chore she can barely persuade herself to complete. She doesn't rise from her bed in the morning. She doesn't shower or turn on the radio or make a cup of coffee. Instead she listens to the murmured voices of her husband, cajoling their daughter to eat her cereal, and her daughter, not questioning why her mother is in bed, but whether she'll still be there at the end of the day. Like yesterday. And the day before.

As the front door slams behind them, as the sounds of their conversation drift away, the house holds its breath again, silence pushing down on her chest. Her arms are resting by her sides, her legs unmoving against the sheets. She tells herself if she waits just a moment longer, he will come.

But the minutes liquefy into hours, and shadows creep across the bedroom wall, swallowing up the light. However long she waits, the outcome is always the same. No small boy burrowing beneath her duvet; no plump fingers, sticky with jam, smoothing her hair from her face and planting kisses on her forehead; no trips to the swimming pool or jumping in puddles or racing each other to the swings and the slide.

No Teddy.

And some days, like today, are both. She is up and dressed before sunrise. But she doesn't turn on the television or the radio because she knows the airwaves will be full of analysis and discussion, photographs of her family and judgement disguised as opinion.

She cannot stomach these 'experts', these so-called talking heads. Their sombre faces and authoritative declarations of how and what she must be feeling sicken her. It is their good fortune to have no experience of what it means to be a part of her family, members of an exclusive club no sane person wants to belong to.

She stands at the window overlooking the bay and watches the fishing boats bring in their catch, the crawl of the sun from sea line to sky. A moment of serenity before the forthcoming storm.

Her daughter is staying with friends for a few days; her husband is – where? She doesn't know and he hasn't told her. She is certain only of one thing. He won't be watching from the public gallery when the trial begins.

As soon as she steps out of the front door, photographers cluster around the gate at the end of the path. One of them shouts out, a rough appeal, 'Head up, love. Can you look this way?' But she doesn't lift her head. It's a story to them, all in a day's work. To her, it's the remnants of a life that grief has all but destroyed.

The taxi's engine is running. A journalist – she's seen him before, both here and on television – is waiting by its passenger door. A cameraman films her as she walks briskly towards the kerb. She won't challenge them because their response is always delivered with the same pigeon-chested belligerence. *The pavement's a public space. We're allowed to be here.* 

She presses her lips together and opens the taxi's rear door. Eyes down. Zero engagement.

'Have you spoken to your sister since that day, Mrs Miller?' The journalist's accent is northern, nasal. When she doesn't reply, he tries again with the kind of faux intimacy she despises. 'Jen? How are things with your parents? Can you tell our viewers what it—'

She slams the door and his words are cut off. She breathes out and fastens her seatbelt with trembling hands.

'Midtown Crown Court?' She hears the question mark in the driver's voice and knows he's asking for more than a confirmation of her destination. Even now, she is unused to the curiosity of strangers.

'Yes.' She doesn't elaborate, but even if she was in the mood for conversation, her voice sounds scratchy with nerves and emotion.

He catches her eye in the rear-view mirror. 'Tough day ahead.' His tone is sympathetic. It's clear he's recognized her. She nods because it's not his fault and she doesn't want to be rude. When they pull up outside the court, she fumbles for her purse but he shakes his head. 'No charge.'

At this act of kindness, a rush of heat spreads across her chest and she blinks back tears.

Outside the courthouse, a phalanx of photographers lies in wait. They haven't noticed her yet but they will. As soon as she steps from the safety of the cab.

Her phone vibrates with a message. It's David Jarvis, the prosecution barrister, short and to the point: *How are things?* He doesn't care about her feelings, though. There's a subtext here and it's as clear to her as the cloudless sky above. *Are you still coming?* 

Eight months and four days ago, her son – her Teddy – was taken from her in an act of reckless stupidity by her sister.

If Jen appears in the witness box today, she will condemn that sister to a life behind bars and a child to a future without a mother. Her parents – almost broken by the tragic events oflast year – will lose their daughter as well as their grandson. But if she does not, her husband will divorce her and seek full custody of their surviving child. As things stand, he will probably win.

The taxi driver looks at the waiting photographers and back at her, a gentleness to his voice that softens his accent, half Albanian, half estuary vowels and glottal stops. 'Shall I drive around the block a couple of times?'

She offers him a ghost of a smile, grateful for his understanding, his display of compassion.

They drive away from the court building, following the curve of the bay. The traffic is light on this July morning, signalling the start of the summer holidays, but it's only a brief postponement. Crowds will arrive later in the day, swarming Midtown-on-Sea's pretty streets and artisan cafes. In the distance, the beach is dotted with a handful of early sunseekers. By lunchtime, it will be packed.

Memory throws her back to the afternoon of the accident on the cusp of autumn and winter, that same bright sand dulled by the rising tide, the gunmetal wash of the estuary and the patches of fog that hung in the air like nebulae. Teddy's laughter carried on the wind. Her parents, her sisters' families and her own, friends and colleagues, gathered for a joyous celebration that tipped into tragedy of the most searing and irreversible kind.

'Are you ready to go back to the courthouse?' The taxi driver interrupts her thoughts. A simple question. Except it's not so simple after all.

Because Jen Miller doesn't know whether to tell the truth.

Or to take her daughter and run.

### **PART ONE** *BEFORE*

#### Thursday, 16 November 2023

Saul

When the fog rolled in from the bay, it was impossible to tell where the sea ended and the land began. This was pertinent to the detective Saul Anguish because he was marooned in a kayak in the middle of a greyness that swallowed everything.

It had come on without warning, in the way that coastal fog sometimes does. A change in air temperature, pushed inland by the wind. Some of the fishermen called it fret, but Saul had another name for it. The darkening. While it gave the illusion of light, it switched off the senses, made him feel disorientated and vulnerable, especially on open water. It was so thick he could not see beyond the bow of the vessel.

He cursed, the clouds of moisture cold against his face. He'd checked the weather forecast before he'd left, but there had been no signs until he'd found himself ambushed by stealth. He couldn't call for help. Mobile phone coverage here was patchy at best. Saul had overheard the fishermen grumbling as they brought in their nets, ringing hotels and restaurants to hustle for orders as soon as they landed on the jetty, but often too late, at a disadvantage to their competitors who'd trawled the waters further along the coast.

The foghorn let out a groan. Saul lifted his head and scanned his surroundings, a flicker of unease stirring within him. He had only the vaguest sense of where he was, the fog transforming the seascape he had come to know intimately into a monochrome canvas. All around him, he could hear the rhythm of the waves, gaining in power and intensity as the wind swept in from the east. He listened for the cry of the gulls, seeking a connection to the natural world, to other living things, and glanced upwards. He'd read somewhere that seabirds fly above fog, using the sun to navigate. But there was nothing inside this murk except him.

He bent, his hair damp in the November chill, and squared his shoulders. From memory, the marina was in a north-westerly direction. He felt in his pocket for the brass compass he'd acquired from the house of a murder victim in the spring of the previous year, her initials engraved across its back.

As soon as he'd seen it, he'd had to have it. It gave him a rush to use it out here on the waves, knowing it had once belonged to her. He ran a thumb across the inscription and wondered if she'd ever done the same. Her name had been Evelyn Parker. She was fifty-eight. The streaks of egg yolk from her breakfast had barely dried on her plate when she was strangled by her husband for having the audacity to undercook his bacon.

Although a gifted detective, Saul hid many secrets. One of them was his compulsion to collect mementoes from every crime scene he attended, intimate treasures that had belonged to the dead and spoke to the darkness within him.

He confirmed his nautical position and put the compass away.

Saul's arms moved at a steady tempo, his paddles carving through the spume. A year ago, he'd never been in a kayak, but after being shot and badly injured by a pair of spree killers at a hotel in Scotland, he'd been undergoing intensive rehabilitation. The scars that the young couple had left on him were more than physical. But the detective was determined to mend his body, if not his mind, and part of that included strengthening the muscles in his back. Blue had suggested sea-kayaking and Saul, seduced by the challenge of mastering an unfamiliar skill in a place he loved, had fallen hard.

That first time, it had felt like a riot to his senses. A robust wind, tempered by the tentative rays of spring sunshine, had exhilarated him in ways he hadn't felt for months. But it had been difficult, in the beginning. Frustratingly so. His deltoids and hamstrings, weakened by lack of exercise, had burned from effort. And when the instructor had guided the kayak back to shore, Saul had stumbled across the wet sand, reaching for his cane, a shadow of the man he'd been.

But, as the seasons turned, as he bought his own kayak and took her out every day, his physique transformed, becoming stronger, leaner. The softness of his post-injury body hardened to match his damaged heart, scarred by everything he'd seen and done. He pushed himself until his mind emptied, and all he could focus on was the movement of his arms, that repetitive rise and slice. He learned how to ride the tides, and to read the weather, and what to do if his kayak was swamped or capsized. Early morning, if those tides allowed, he would drag himself from the coastguard's lookout, his cottage on the promontory of a cliff, while the rest of the world slept, and he would be alone, at the mercy of the gods of sea and sky.

The deeds of his past still taunted him as he lay, open-eyed and heartsore, in the quiet hours of the night, but while his mind was active, the intense physicality of being on open water wearied him, and sometimes he lost himself to the luxury of sleep.

On those nights when sleep eluded him, he would rise in the hours before dawn and sift through the paperwork he'd begun to assemble as part of the Chief Constable's off-the-record investigation, the call logs and CCTV footage, and scraps of evidence he'd gathered himself. To avoid suspicion, his work was conducted in the hours around his own duties, in those shadowy between-times when he was alone.

While he did not like the liar that duplicity had made of him, he recognized its necessity. It was a long game, one of skill and strategy, and Saul was determined to win it. But like any game, the power balance could shift at any time, and he could not afford to make costly mistakes.

A sound caught his attention, as if something was breaking the surface of the waves. He stilled for a minute, catching his breath, allowing his kayak to drift. Above the pump of his heart, he heard a rhythmic splashing, like a seal he'd once seen by the wharf.

Through the grey cloak of the fog, a small rowing boat came into view. Its occupant had her back to him, but he could tell it was a woman, resting the handles of the oars in her lap. He opened his mouth to call to her, to warn her about a nearby rocky outcrop that had torn a hole in the hull of many

unsuspecting vessels in this corner of the bay, but she'd picked up the oars again and was moving at a determined clip across the water.

Something about the urgency of her movement piqued Saul's curiosity, and he angled his kayak in her direction, keeping his paddles loose and still.

When the woman came into view again, she was much closer. The wind had begun to strengthen, thinning the fog, and she was clearly visible, although she hadn't noticed him yet. She placed her oars in the bottom of the boat and reached down to retrieve an item from a plastic bag. Saul frowned, unsure if the drifting clouds of fret were playing tricks on his vision. He inched his kayak towards her, his movements quiet and discreet.

In her right hand she was holding a white dress with a large print of a rose at its breast. Saul was no expert, but if he'd been forced to make a guess, he'd have said it belonged to a child. The wind ran through it, and it moved, like the ghost of a past he could not know and didn't understand.

The woman half stood, and the boat lurched, knocking her off balance. Heart in mouth, Saul watched her steady herself. The dress had capped sleeves and was full-skirted, embroidered with a handful of blue and yellow flowers. A summer dress. A promise.

The woman held it close to her for a few seconds, and then tossed it into the sea. As she lifted her head, she caught sight of Saul. Shocked, she turned away from him, obscuring her face. But it was too late. He'd already seen her.

As quickly as she'd arrived, she was gone, rowing hard and fast across the waves in the direction of the marina and the expensive waterfront estates. Saul considered following her, but could not find a reason to do so. Instead, he found himself peering into the choppy waves, wondering why she'd gone to the effort of disposing of it in this way, and what had caused her to commit such a final and deliberate act.

It didn't take him long to find it. In a quirk of fortune, the dress had snagged on the rocky outcrop he'd intended to warn her about, and the ebb and flow of the water made the fabric billow, as if it was a living thing. A cog whirred in Saul's mind, a mechanical click and grind. For reasons he could