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Opening Extract from...

The Secret Place

Written by Tana French

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The Secret Place

TANA FRENCH



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I

She came looking for me. Most people stay arm's length away. A patchy murmur on the tip-line, *Back in '95 I saw,* no name, *click* if you ask. A letter printed out and posted from the wrong town, paper and envelope dusted clean. If we want them, we have to go hunting. But her: she was the one who came for me.

I didn't recognise her. I was up the stairs and heading for the squad room at a bounce. May morning that felt like summer, juicy sun spilling through the reception windows, lighting the whole cracked-plaster room. A tune playing in my head, me humming along.

I saw her, course I did. On the scraped-up leather sofa in the corner, arms folded, crossed ankle swinging. Long platinum ponytail; sharp school uniform, green-and-navy kilt, navy blazer. Someone's kid, I figured, waiting for Daddy to bring her to the dentist. The superintendent's kid, maybe. Someone on better money than me, anyway. Not just the crest on the blazer; the graceful slouch, the cock of her chin like the place was hers if she could be arsed with the paperwork. Then I was past her – quick nod, in case she was the gaffer's – and reaching for the squad-room door.

I don't know if she recognised me. Maybe not. It had been six years, she'd been just a little kid, nothing about me stands out except the red hair. She could have forgotten. Or she could have known me right off, kept quiet for her own reasons.

She let our admin say, 'Detective Moran, there's someone to see you,' pen pointing at the sofa. 'Miss Holly Mackey.'

Sun skidding across my face as I whipped around, and then: of course. I should've known the eyes. Wide, bright blue, and something about the delicate arc of the lids: a cat's slant, a pale jewelled

girl in an old painting, a secret. 'Holly,' I said, hand out. 'Hiya. It's been a long time.'

A second where those eyes didn't blink, took in everything about me and gave back nothing. Then she stood up. She still shook hands like a little girl, pulling away too quick. 'Hi, Stephen,' she said.

Her voice was good. Clear and cool, not that cartoon squeal. The accent: high-end, but not the distorted ugly-posh. Her dad wouldn't have let her away with that. Straight out of the blazer and into community school, if she'd brought that home.

'What can I do for you?'

Lower: 'I've got something to give you.'

That left me lost. Ten past nine in the morning, all uniformed up: she was mitching off, from a school that would notice; this wasn't about a years-late thank-you card. 'Yeah?'

'Well, not *here*.'

The eye-tilt at our admin said *privacy*. A teenage girl, you watch yourself. A detective's kid, you watch twice as hard. But Holly Mackey: bring in someone she doesn't want, and you're done for the day.

I said, 'Let's find somewhere we can talk.'

I work Cold Cases. When we bring witnesses in, they want to believe this doesn't count: not really a murder investigation, not a proper one with guns and cuffs, nothing that'll slam through your life like a tornado. Something old and soft, instead, worn fuzzy round the edges. We play along. Our main interview room looks like a nice dentist's waiting room. Squashy sofas, Venetian blinds, glass table of dog-eared magazines. Crap tea and coffee. No need to notice the video camera in the corner or the one-way glass behind one set of blinds, not if you don't want to, and they don't. This won't hurt a bit, sir, just a few little minutes and off you go home.

I took Holly there. Another kid would have been twitching all the way, playing head tennis, but none of this was new on Holly. She headed down the corridor like it was part of her gaff.

On the way I watched her. She was doing a grand job of growing up. Average height, or a little under. Slim, very slim, but it was natural: no starved look. Maybe halfway through getting her curves. No

stunner, not yet anyway, but nothing ugly there – no spots, no braces, none of her face stuck on sideways – and the eyes made her more than another blonde clone, made you look twice.

A boyfriend who'd hit her? Groped her, raped her? Holly coming to me instead of to some stranger in Sex Crime?

Something to give you. Evidence?

She shut the interview-room door behind us, flick of her wrist and a slam. Looked around.

I switched on the camera, casual push of the switch. Said, 'Have a seat.'

Holly stayed put. Ran a finger over the bald-patch green of the sofa. 'This room's nicer than the ones before.'

'How're you getting on?'

Still looking around the room, not at me. 'OK. Fine.'

'Will I get you a cup of tea? Coffee?'

Shake of her head.

I waited. Holly said, 'You've got older. You used to look like a student.'

'And you used to look like a little kid who brought her doll to interviews. Clara, wasn't it?' That turned her head my way. 'I'd say we've both got older, here.'

For the first time, she smiled. Little crunch of a grin, the same one I remembered. It had had something pathetic in it, back then, it had caught at me every time. It did again.

She said, 'It's nice to see you.'

When Holly was nine, ten, she was a witness in a murder case. The case wasn't mine, but I was the one she'd talk to. I took her statement; I prepped her to testify at the trial. She didn't want to do it, did it anyway. Maybe her da the detective made her. Maybe. Even when she was nine, I never fooled myself I had the measure of her.

'Same here,' I said.

A quick breath that lifted her shoulders, a nod – to herself, like something had clicked. She dumped her schoolbag on the floor. Hooked a thumb under her lapel, to point the crest at me. Said, 'I go to Kilda's now.' And watched me.

Just nodding made me feel cheeky. St Kilda's: the kind of school the likes of me aren't supposed to have heard of. Never would have heard of, if it wasn't for a dead young fella.

Girls' secondary, private, leafy suburb. Nuns. A year back, two of the nuns went for an early stroll and found a boy lying in a grove of trees, in a back corner of the school grounds. At first they thought he was asleep, drunk maybe. Revved up to give him seven shades of shite, find out whose precious virtue he'd been corrupting. The full-on nun-voice thunder: *Young man!* But he didn't move.

Christopher Harper, sixteen, from the boys' school one road and two extra-high walls away. Sometime during the night, someone had bashed his head in.

Enough manpower to build an office block, enough overtime to pay off mortgages, enough paper to dam a river. A dodgy janitor, handyman, something: eliminated. A classmate who'd had a punch-up with the victim: eliminated. Local scary non-nationals seen being locally scary: eliminated.

Then nothing. No more suspects, no reason why Christopher was on St Kilda's grounds. Then less overtime, and fewer men, and more nothing. You can't say it, not with a kid for a victim, but the case was done. By this time, all that paper was in Murder's basement. Sooner or later the brass would catch some hassle from the media and it would show up on our doorstep, addressed to the Last Chance Saloon.

Holly pulled her lapel straight again. 'You know about Chris Harper,' she said. 'Right?'

'Right,' I said. 'Were you at St Kilda's back then?'

'Yeah. I've been there since first year. I'm in fourth year now.'

And left it at that, making me work for every step. One wrong question and she'd be gone, I'd be thrown away: got too old, another useless adult who didn't understand. I picked carefully.

'Are you a boarder?'

'The last two years, yeah. Only Monday to Friday. I go home for weekends.'

I couldn't remember the day. 'Were you there the night it happened?'

'The night Chris got killed.'

Blue flash of annoyance. Daddy's kid: no patience for pussyfooting, or anyway not from other people.

'The night Chris got killed,' I said. 'Were you there?'

'I wasn't *there* there. Obviously. But I was in school, yeah.'

'Did you see something? Hear something?'

Annoyance again, sparking hotter this time. 'They already *asked* me that. The Murder detectives. They asked all of us, like, a thousand *times*.'

I said, 'But you could have remembered something since. Or changed your mind about keeping something quiet.'

'I'm not *stupid*. I know how this stuff works. Remember?' She was on her toes, ready to head for the door.

Change of tack. 'Did you know Chris?'

Holly quieted. 'Just from around. Our schools do stuff together; you get to know people. We weren't close, or anything, but our gangs had hung out together a bunch of times.'

'What was he like?'

Shrug. 'A guy.'

'Did you like him?'

Shrug again. 'He was there.'

I know Holly's da, a bit. Frank Mackey, Undercover. You go at him straight, he'll dodge and come in sideways; you go at him sideways, he'll charge head down. I said, 'You came here because there's something you want me to know. I'm not going to play guessing games I can't win. If you're not sure you want to tell me, then go away and have a think till you are. If you're sure now, then spit it out.'

Holly approved of that. Almost smiled again; nodded instead.

'There's this board,' she said. 'In school. A noticeboard. It's on the top floor, across from the art room. It's called the Secret Place. If you've got a secret, like if you hate your parents or you like a guy or whatever, you can put it on a card and stick it up there.'

No point asking why anyone would want to. Teenage girls: you'll never understand. I've got sisters. I learned to just leave it.

'Yesterday evening, me and my friends were up in the art room – we're working on this project. I forgot my phone up there when we

left, but I didn't notice till lights-out, so I couldn't get it then. I went up for it first thing this morning, before breakfast.'

Coming out way too pat; not a pause or a blink, not a stumble. Another girl, I'd've called bullshit. But Holly had practice, and she had her da; for all I knew, he took a statement every time she was late home.

'I had a look at the board,' Holly said. Bent to her schoolbag, flipped it open. 'Just on my way past.'

And there it was: the hand hesitating above the green folder. The extra second when she kept her face turned down to the bag, away from me, ponytail tumbling to hide her. The nerves I'd been watching for. Not ice-cream-cool and smooth right through, after all.

Then she straightened and met my eyes again, blank-faced. Her hand came up, held out the green folder. Let go as soon as I touched it, so quick I almost let it fall.

'This was on the board.'

The folder said 'Holly Mackey, 4L, Social Awareness Studies', scribbled over. Inside: clear plastic envelope. Inside that: a thumbtack, fallen down into one corner, and a piece of card.

I recognised the face faster than I'd recognised Holly's. He had spent weeks on every front page and every TV screen, on every department bulletin.

This was a different shot. Caught turning over his shoulder against a blur of autumn-yellow leaves, mouth opening in a laugh. Good-looking. Glossy brown hair, brushed forward boyband-style to thick dark eyebrows that sloped down at the outsides, gave him a puppydog look. Clear skin, rosy cheeks; a few freckles along the cheekbones, not a lot. A jaw that would've turned out strong, if there'd been time. Wide grin that crinkled his eyes and nose. A little bit cocky, a little bit sweet. Young, everything that rises green in your mind when you hear the word *young*. Summer romance, baby brother's hero, cannon-fodder.

Glued below his face, across his blue T-shirt: words cut out of a book, spaced wide like a ransom note. Neat edges, snipped close.

I know who killed him

Holly watching me, silent.

I turned the envelope over. Plain white card, the kind you can buy anywhere to print off your photos. No writing, nothing.

I said, 'Did you touch it?'

Eyes to the ceiling. 'Course not. I went into the art room and got that' – the envelope – 'and a balsa knife. I pulled out the tack with the knife, and I caught the card and the tack in the envelope.'

'Well done. And then?'

'I put it up my shirt till I got back to my room, and then I put it in the folder. Then I said I felt sick and went back to bed. After the nurse came round, I sneaked out and came here.'

I asked, 'Why?'

Holly gave me an eyebrows-up stare. 'Because I thought you guys might want to *know*. If you don't care, then you can just throw it away, and I can get back to school before they find out I'm gone.'

'I care. I'm only delighted you found this. I'm just wondering why you didn't take it to one of your teachers, or your dad.'

A glance up at the wall clock, catching the video camera on the way. 'Crap. That actually reminds me. The nurse comes round again at breaktime, and if I'm not there, they will *freak out*. Can you phone the school and say you're my dad and I'm with you? Say my granddad's dying, and when you rang to tell me, I did a runner without telling anyone because I didn't want to get sent to the guidance counsellor to talk about my *feelings*.'

All worked out for me. 'I'll ring the school now. I'm not going to say I'm your dad, though.' Exasperated explosion of sigh from Holly. 'I'll just say you had something you wanted to pass on to us, and you did the right thing. That should keep you out of hassle. Yeah?'

'Whatever. Can you at least tell them I'm not allowed to talk about it? So they won't bug me?'

'No problem.' Chris Harper still laughing at me, enough energy running in the turn of those shoulders to power half Dublin. I slid him back in the folder, closed it over. 'Did you tell anyone about this? Your best friend, maybe? It's grand if you did; I just need to know.'

A shadow sliding down the curve of Holly's cheekbone, turning her mouth older, less simple. Layering something under her voice. 'No. I didn't tell anyone.'

'OK. I'm going to make this call, and then I'll take your statement. Do you want one of your parents to sit in?'

That brought her back. 'Oh, Jesus, no. Does someone have to sit in? Can't you just do it?'

'What age are you?'

She thought about lying. Decided against it. 'Sixteen.'

'We need an appropriate adult. Stop me intimidating you.'

'You don't intimidate me.'

No shit. 'I know, yeah. Still. You hang on here, make yourself a cup of tea if you fancy one. I'll be back in two minutes.'

Holly thumped down on the sofa. Coiled into a twist: legs curled under, arms wrapped round. Pulled the end of her ponytail round to the front and started biting it. The building was boiling as per usual, but she looked cold. She didn't watch me leave.

Sex Crime, two floors down, keep a social worker on call. I got her in, took Holly's statement. Asked your woman, in the corridor afterwards, would she drive Holly back to St Kilda's – Holly gave me the daggers for that. I said, 'This way your school knows for definite you were actually with us; you didn't just get a boyfriend to ring in. Save you hassle.' Her look said I didn't fool anyone.

She didn't ask me what next, what we were going to do about that card. She knew better. She just said, 'See you soon.'

'Thanks for coming in. You did the right thing.'

Holly didn't answer that. Just gave me the edge of a smile and a little wave, half sarcastic, half not.

I was watching that straight back move away down the corridor, social worker duckfooting along beside her trying for a chat, when I copped: she'd never answered my question. Swerved out of the way, neat as a rollerblader, and kept right on moving.

'Holly.'

She turned, hauling her bag strap up her shoulder. Wary.

'What I asked you earlier. Why'd you bring this to me?'

Holly considered me. Unsettling, that look, like the follow-you stare off a painting.

'Back before,' she said. 'The whole year, everyone was *tiptoeing*. Like if they said one single wrong word, I'd have a nervous

breakdown and get taken away in a straitjacket, *foaming*. Even Dad – he pretended to be totally not bothered, but I could see him worrying, all the time. It was just, *ahhh*!' A gritted noise of pure fury, hands starfished rigid. 'You were the only one who didn't act like I was about to start thinking I was a *chicken*. You were just like, *OK, this sucks, but big deal, worse stuff happens to people all the time and they survive. Now let's get it done*.'

It's very very important to show sensitivity to juvenile witnesses. We get workshops and all; PowerPoint presentations, if our luck's really in. Me, I remember what it was like, being a kid. People forget that. A little dab of sensitive: lovely. A dab more, grand. A dab more, you're daydreaming throat-punches.

I said, 'Being a witness does suck. For anyone. You were better able for it than most.'

No sarcasm in the smile, this time. Other stuff, plenty, but not sarcasm. 'Can you explain to them at school that I don't think I'm a chicken?' Holly asked the social worker, who was plastering on extra sensitive to hide the baffled. 'Not even a little?' And left.

One thing about me: I've got plans.

First thing I did, once I'd waved bye-bye to Holly and the social worker, I looked up the Harper case on the system.

Lead detective: Antoinette Conway.

A woman working Murder shouldn't rate scandal, shouldn't even rate a mention. But a lot of the old boys are old-school; a lot of the young ones, too. Equality is paper-deep, peel it away with a fingernail. The grapevine says Conway got the gig by shagging someone, says she got it by ticking the token boxes – something extra in there, something that's not pasty potato-face Irish: sallow skin, strong sweeps to her nose and her cheekbones, blue-black shine on her hair. Shame she's not in a wheelchair, the grapevine says, or she'd be commissioner by now.

I knew Conway, to see anyway, before she was famous. Back in training college, she was two years behind me. Tall girl, hair scraped back hard. Built like a runner, long limbs, long muscles. Chin always high, shoulders always back. A lot of guys buzzed round Conway, her

first week: just trying to help her settle in, nice to be friendly, nice to be nice, just coincidence that the girls who didn't look the same didn't get the same. Whatever she said to the boys, after the first week they stopped giving her come-ons. They gave her shite instead.

Two years behind me, in training. Got out of uniform one year behind. Made Murder the same time I made Cold Cases.

Cold Cases is good. Very bleeding good for a guy like me: working-class Dub, first in my family to go for a Leaving Cert instead of an apprenticeship. I was out of uniform by twenty-six, out of the General Detective Unit and into Vice by twenty-eight – Holly's da put in a word for me there. Into Cold Cases the week I turned thirty, hoping there was no word put in, scared there was. I'm thirty-two now. Time to keep moving on up.

Cold Cases is good. Murder is better.

Holly's da can't put in a word for me there, even if I wanted one. The Murder gaffer hates his guts. He's not fond of mine, either.

That case when Holly was my witness: I took the collar. I gave the caution, I clicked the handcuffs, I signed my name on the arrest report. I was just a floater, should have handed over anything worthwhile that came my way; should have been back in the incident room, like a good boy, typing seen-nothing statements. I took the collar anyway. I had earned it.

Another thing about me: I know my shot when I see it.

That collar, along with the nudge off Frank Mackey, got me out of the General Unit. That collar got me my chance at Cold Cases. That collar locked me out of Murder.

I heard the click, with the click of the handcuffs. *You are not obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so,* and I knew that was me on Murder's shit list for the foreseeable. But handing over the collar would have put me on the dead-end list, staring down the barrel of decades typing up other people's seen-nothing statements. *Anything you do say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence*. Click.

You see your shot, you take it. I was sure that lock would open again, somewhere down the line.

Seven years on, and the truth was starting to hit.

Murder is the thoroughbred stable. Murder is a shine and a dazzle, a smooth ripple like honed muscle, take your breath away. Murder is a brand on your arm, like an elite army unit's, like a gladiator's, saying for all your life: *One of us. The finest.*

I want Murder.

I could have sent the card and Holly's statement over to Antoinette Conway with a note, end of story. Even better behaved, I could have rung her the second Holly pulled out that card, handed the both of them over.

Not a chance. This was my shot. This was my one and only.

The second name on the Harper case: Thomas Costello. Murder's old workhorse. A couple of hundred years on the squad, a couple of months into retirement. When a spot opens on the Murder squad, I know. Antoinette Conway hadn't picked up a new partner yet. She was still flying solo.

I went and found my gaffer. He didn't miss what I was at, but he liked what it would do for us, being involved in a high-profile solve. Liked what it would do for next year's budget. Liked me, too, but not enough to miss me. He had no problem with me heading over to Murder to give Conway her Happy Wednesday card in person. No need to hurry back, said the gaffer. If Murder wanted me on this, they could have me.

Conway wasn't going to want me. She was getting me anyway.

Conway was in an interview. I sat on an empty desk in the Murder squad room, had the crack with the lads. Not a lot of crack, now; Murder is busy. Walk in there, feel your heart rate notch up. Phones ringing, computers clicking, people going in and out; not hurried, but fast. But a few of them took time out to give me a poke or two. You want Conway? Thought she was getting some, all right, she hasn't bust anyone's balls all week; never thought she was getting it off a guy, though. Thanks for taking one for the team, man. Got your shots? Got your gimp suit?

They were all a few years older than me, all dressed that bit snappier. I grinned and kept my mouth shut, give or take.

'Never would've guessed she went for the redsers.'

'At least I've got hair, man. No one likes a baldy bollix.'

'I've got a gorgeous babe at home who does.'

'That's not what she said last night.'

Give or take.

Antoinette Conway came in with a handful of paper, slammed the door with her elbow. Headed for her desk.

Still that stride, keep up or fuck off. Tall as me – six foot – and it was on purpose: two inches of that was square heels, crush your toe right off. Black trouser suit, not cheap, cut sharp and narrow; no effort to hide the shape on those long legs, the tight arse. Just crossing that squad room, she said *You want to make something of it?* half a dozen ways.

'He confess, Conway?'

'No.'

'Tsk. Losing your touch.'

'He's not a suspect, fuckhead.'

'You let that stop you? Good kick in the nads and Bob's your uncle: confession.'

Not just the normal back-and-forth. A prickle in the air, a slicing edge. I couldn't tell if it was about her, or just the day that was in it, or if it was the squad. Murder is different. The beat goes faster and harder; the tightrope is higher and narrower. One foot wrong, and you're gone.

Conway dropped into her chair, started pulling up something on her computer.

'Your boyfriend's here, Conway.'

She ignored that.

'Does he not get a snog, no?'

'What're you shiteing on about?'

The joker jerked a thumb at me. 'All yours.'

Conway gave me a stare. Cold dark eyes, full mouth that didn't give a millimetre. No makeup.

'Yeah?'

'Stephen Moran. Cold Cases.' I held out the evidence envelope, across her desk. Thanked God I wasn't one of the ones who'd sleazed her up in training. 'This came in to me today.'

Her face didn't change when she saw the card. She took her time looking it over, both sides, reading the statement. 'Her,' she said, when she got to Holly's name.

'You know her?'

'Interviewed her, last year. Couple of times. Got fuck-all out of her; snotty little bitch. All of them are, in that school, but she was one of the worst. Like pulling teeth.'

I said, 'You figure she knew something?'

Sharp glance, lift of the statement sheet. 'How'd you end up with this?'

'Holly Mackey was a witness in a case I worked, back in '07. We got on. Even better than I thought, looks like.'

Conway's eyebrow went up. She'd heard about the case. Which meant she'd heard about me. 'OK,' she said. Nothing in her tone, either way. 'Thanks.'

She swung her chair away from me and punched at her phone. Clamped the receiver under her jaw and leaned back in her chair, rereading.

Rough, my mam would have called Conway. *That Antoinette one,* and a sideways look with her chin tucked down: *a bit rough.* Not meaning her personality, or not just; meaning where she came from, and what. The accent told you, and the stare. Dublin, inner city; just a quick walk from where I grew up, maybe, but miles away all the same. Tower blocks. IRA-wannabe graffiti and puddles of piss. Junkies. People who'd never passed an exam in their lives but had every twist and turn of dole maths down pat. People who wouldn't have approved of Conway's career choice.

There's people who like rough. They think it's cool, it's street, it'll rub off and they'll be able to pull off all the good slang. Rough doesn't look so sexy when you grew up on the banks of it, your whole family doggy-paddling like mad to keep their heads above the flood tide. I like smooth, smooth as velvet.

I reminded myself: no need to be Conway's best bud. Just be useful enough to get on her gaffer's radar, and keep moving.

'Sophie. It's Antoinette.' Her mouth loosened when she talked to someone she liked; got a ready-for-anything curl to the corner, like a

dare. It made her younger, made her into someone you'd try and chat up in the pub, if you were feeling gutsy. 'Yeah, good. You? . . . I got a photo coming your way . . . Nah, the Harper case. I need fingerprints, but can you have a look at the actual pic for me, too? Check out what it was taken on, when it was taken, where, what it was printed out on. Anything you can give me.' She tilted the envelope closer. 'And I got words stuck on it. Cut-out words, like ransom-note shite. See can you figure out where they got cut out of, yeah? . . . Yeah, I know. Make me a miracle. See you 'round.'

She hung up. Pulled a smartphone out of her pocket and took shots of the card: front, back, up close, far off, details. Headed over to a printer in the corner to print them off. Turned back to her desk and saw me.

Stared me out of it. I looked back.

'You still here?'

I said, 'I want to work with you on this one.'

A slice of a laugh. 'I bet you do.' She dropped back into her chair, found an envelope in a desk drawer.

'You said yourself you got nowhere with Holly Mackey and her mates. But she likes me enough, or trusts me enough, that she brought me this. And if she'll talk to me, she'll get her mates talking to me.'

Conway thought about that. Swung her chair from side to side.

I asked, 'What've you got to lose?'

Maybe the accent did it. Most cops come up from farms, from small towns; no love for the smart-arse Dubs who think they're the centre of the universe, when everyone knows that's Ballybumfuck. Or maybe she liked whatever it was she'd heard about me. Either way:

She scrawled a name on the envelope, slid the card inside. Said, 'I'm going down the school, take a look at this noticeboard, have a few chats. You can come if you want. If you're any use to me, we can talk about what happens next. If you're not, you can fuck off back to Cold Cases.'

I knew better than to let the *Yes!* show. 'Sounds good.'

'Do you need to ring your mammy and say you're not coming home?'

'My gaffer knows the story. It's not a problem.'

'Right,' Conway said. She shoved her chair back. 'I'll get you up to speed on the way. And I drive.'

Someone wolf-whistled after us, low, as we went out the door. Ripple of snickers. Conway didn't look back.

Stephen King knows who killed him.

'It's terrific - terrifying, amazing, and the prose is incandescent'

Kate Mosse knows who killed him.

'Gripping and ingenious.'

Sophie Hannah knows.

'The thing Tana French does better than almost any living crime writer is create suspense.'

Do You?

#TheSecretPlace

28.08.2014

Clear the date