

Tracy Darnton



LIVE BY



# THE RULES



DIE BY



LITTLE TIGER

LONDON

*For Tricia and Pete, who always seem to know which rules to follow and which to break.*

*The Rules* contains content some readers may find triggering, including references to and instances of domestic abuse and violence, PTSD and panic attacks.

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# **RULE: TRUST NO ONE**

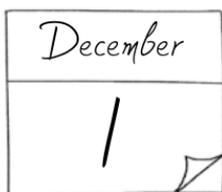
That's the strange thing about Dad's rules. I thought they were just his weird nonsense at first but then I realized I was following them. I mean, *choosing* to follow them – not just because he'd scratched them up on the massive board fixed to the wall. When Dad said *Trust no one*, he meant officials, the state, teachers, doctors, even other preppers.

And I followed the Rule.

I *still* follow the Rule.

I trust no one.

Especially him.



It's hard to imagine, but the Bowling Plaza is even worse than usual tonight. A giant, bobbing inflatable snowman is tethered to the roof, casting menacing shadows over the car park. Inside they've strung up cheap tinsel and 'Season's Greetings' banners, and a plastic tree with red and green baubles sits on the reception desk, getting in the way. It's only the first day of December, but already there's a sickly smell of stale mulled wine and a drunken office party is messing about by the pool tables.

Spotty Paul on shoe duty is dressed as an elf. You'd think he'd have more respect for himself. I don't like doing anything where you have to wear communal shoes. I've had enough of hand-me-down crap. Paul sprays them with a sickly aerosol between each customer, but even so, it freaks me out. I shudder as I put them on.

This interests Julie and she makes a note in her stripey book as usual.

“Maybe it’s due to my feelings of abandonment,” I tell her helpfully so she has something else to write down. “Or maybe it’s because I dislike other people’s smelly feet – which is completely rational, by the way.”

Can you believe social services still has a budget for bowling and ice cream with Julie? The free ice cream would be OK if I was, like, six years old and on a beach. I’d rather have a double-shot Americano. I don’t want a machine coffee in a plastic cup, so I stare for a while at the ice-cream choices to build the suspense before saying, “Nothing, thanks.”

Julie looks disappointed. Maybe because she is now a grown woman licking a Solero next to a teenage girl sipping at a cup of water. I tell Julie she should cut back on the ice creams. If she takes all her clients out like this, no wonder.

“No wonder, Julie,” I say, tutting.

Julie reddens and makes another note. Does she ever just call it as it is or does she always have some mumbo-jumbo excuse for my behaviour? “So who’s drawn the short straw this year?” I ask.

“We’re having a little trouble getting the right placement for you after term finishes,” says Julie, fidgeting. This is Julie-speak for ‘nobody wants you’.

“How will Santa know where to find me?” I stare, wide-

eyed. I see her processing whether I'm serious or not. She just doesn't get irony.

To be honest, I see the Christmas stuff happening around me like a trailer for a film I don't get to watch in full; like those adverts on TV where one big happy family sits down at a glittering table with a shiny turkey. It's not my world. I'm like the Ghost of Christmas No One Wants in a foster home. They have to pretend to like me and cover up the fact their own child gets piles of gifts from relatives who actually give a damn.

"So no room at the inn," I say, and laugh. "That reminds me of something."

"It'll be fine." Julie pats my hand. I shrug her off.

"Tell them it's only dogs who aren't just for Christmas – you can get rid of kids, no problem," I say. "Anyway, I don't know what all the fuss is about. It's just a day when the shops are shut and the telly's better."

Julie's Solero is dripping down her hand. I watch as the drip plops on to her lap.

"Can't I stay at Beechwood by myself?" I already know the answer.

The office party's getting rowdier, singing along to piped Christmas singles from last century. Paul the elf has to intervene.

I start bowling with Julie. "The sooner we begin, the sooner it's over," I say.

We take the furthest alley as usual, like an old married

couple picking their regular table at the pizzeria.

I watch as she bowls. The ball trickles down the polished lane, heading slowly for the gutter at the side. She looks surprised. I don't know why. She's always rubbish at this. I used to think she was letting me win and hate her for it, as if my winning a game of ten-pin bowling would make everything all right in Julie-world. She keeps asking me if I'm OK, if I'm having a good time. Please! In this place? She's poking in her bag and casting glances my way like she's got more to tell me. I know the signs.

I win the game, by the way. I always win at things that don't matter.

"I have some news," says Julie, when we stop for her to take a rest and guzzle a fizzy drink.

Finally. What now?

"We've had a letter for you. From your dad. How do you feel about that?" She is obsessed, literally obsessed, with how I feel about everything. "We've struggled to find him, as you know. There was some confusion over names and information." She rummages in her briefcase and hands me an envelope. It sits in my hand like an unexploded bomb.

"If you don't want to look at it today, we can save it for another time. This must all be a big surprise," says Julie. She pats my knee. "Turns out he was back in America." She says it like that's an achievement – like he's a film star rather than a waster.

STRIKE! The teenagers on the alley next to us are doing

a moonwalk as the scoring machine flashes and plays loud music.

What am I doing in this place?

I look carefully at the envelope addressed to Somerset Social Services. The idiots looking for him must have told him where I've ended up. I flip it over. The return address is a place in Florida.

Julie checks her watch. Her concern for me only lasts until eight o'clock. She has to get back to her real life. She fiddles with her wedding ring.

I breathe. I listen to the clatter of the bowling balls and the whoops of another strike.

"OK," I say. "I'll read it."

I remove the letter from the envelope with my fingertips as if it's hot. It's oh-so-carefully typed, but I'm not fooled by him.

F.A.O. Amber Fitzpatrick

Dear Amber,

I can't tell you how pleased I was to finally have news of you. I'm sorry for your loss. I can only imagine what you've been through. But you don't need to worry about anything now - I'm here for you.

Your mom made it pretty difficult after we split

up, but I never stopped looking for the pair of you. You know I'd never give up. I went to your old addresses, but you'd moved on every time. You always were a hard girl to pin down, Amber. I can't wait to see what a beautiful young woman you've grown into.

I look forward to rekindling that special bond between us.

Your loving father

"Short but sweet," says Julie. "He's been looking for you all this time."

There's nothing sweet about my father, but then she's never met him. She knows nothing real about him. About him and me. I promised Mum in one of her lucid episodes that I'd never tell anyone what he used to do to her ... to me. He damaged her forever as sure as if he'd poured the alcohol and the pills down her throat himself. Some secrets are safer kept – especially when your dad's not the forgiving type.

It dawns on me that Julie's probably thinking Dad's the Christmas miracle, appearing to solve all her problems with placing me. She's seeing a happy reunion in Julie la-la land. But that's the last thing I want. And now he's found me, I know there's no way Julie can keep me safe. Not from him. I can't rely on anybody but me.

“So how do you feel about your dad getting back in touch?”

Feelings again. Always feelings.

She checks her notebook. “It’s been a while since you’ve seen him. We had a lucky break in tracking him down at last.”

Lucky? He’s always landed on his feet. Like a cat with nine lives. After all Mum’s efforts with fake names and addresses to make sure the do-gooders couldn’t find him, even when she was in hospital and I was playing foster-care roulette.

“Would you like to write back?”

“No need,” I say.

“You may feel that now,” starts Julie, “but let’s talk about it again when you’ve thought some more. Maybe chat it through with Dr Meadows. It’s a lot to take in, sweetie.”

And as usual she’s got the wrong end of the stick. She hasn’t actually read the letter properly. She doesn’t know how my father operates – but I do. Ten days have passed since the posting date. He’ll be on his way – if he’s not already here. I look around me, suspicious now of the office partygoers. I need to make plans. I have to disappear.

“Now that your mum is...” Julie pulls awkwardly at her necklace.

“Dead, you mean.”

“...no longer here, we could explore other family options.”

Family? My dad? I'd rather be shackled up with some cardboard and a blanket in a multi-storey car park. Mum and I did it to get away from him before. And yet now ... now I have more to lose. I have what Julie would call prospects. My grades are good, I want to go to university. I have decent teachers. Not that I'd ever tell them that.

Julie puffs to her feet and waddles over to choose a bowling ball. "Come on, double or quits."

I think of my neat little room at Beechwood School: the duvet cover that Julie and I picked out at Primark, the posters I carefully stuck to the wall and the row of books on the shelf. There's a bright orange cushion Julie bought me for my birthday that I pretended not to like. Too big to pack now. The furniture is brown and slightly tatty, circa 1999, but everyone's room is like that. I don't stand out among the boarders except in the holidays.

Julie heads off to the ladies after all that Diet Coke, while I stare at the wall and try to think straight. I thought I'd made myself invisible, and then Julie's boss ruins it all by interfering in my business. The letter has tracked me down like a heat-seeking missile and I'm not free of Dad even at the rundown Bowling Plaza. I dig my fingernails into the palm of my hand, cross with myself for getting complacent, for getting to like somewhere, when I should have known it wouldn't last.



Julie hugs me in the car once we've pulled up outside Beechwood. I let her. She won't be seeing me again. I bite my lip and stare out at the flickering lights on the tree by the main entrance. The angel at the top has broken and the wings are blinking on and off. I was going to help decorate the hall with holly and ivy next week. Proper greenery from the garden – real decorations, not ones made of foil and plastic.

She reaches over to the back seat and passes me a red envelope. Not another letter bombshell.

"It's an advent calendar," she says, smiling.

It's bigger than a normal greetings card, with twenty-four tiny windows scattered across a picture of polar bears wearing knitted scarves. Silver glitter falls off as I touch it. Merry Christmas, Planet.

"Where are the chocolates, Julie?" I say. "Did you eat them all?"

Her cheeks flush as she ignores my comment. "Open it up, lovely."

Inside, Julie's written in her best handwriting:

*Dear Amber, Hope you enjoy opening the windows and are looking forward to the festive season. J xxx*

She never quite has the right words. Never sounds normal. Because she fools herself that she's 'down with the kids', she's added a smiley face. Why would I be looking forward

to the festive season, when we've already established it's a major inconvenience finding somewhere for me to go?

"It feels like snow's on the way," says Julie, as I stare down at the polar bears. "A white Christmas maybe."

A cold one, then.

"Could I have some extra cash?" I ask. "I need some toiletries and stuff."

She marks it in her notebook and hands me thirty pounds.

"I'll see you next week. We can write a response to your dad's letter together, if you like. No pressure. Whatever's best for you." She smiles. "Maybe with Christmas coming..."

She's happier being useful, making plans.

"Sure. I'll think about it." I shove the cash in my pocket and toss her a bone: "I know I can be a right cow sometimes."

She blushes, unsure what to say to that as it's so true. I can't help but feel slightly fond of her and her flowery smocks.

"Take care of yourself," she says.

I intend to.

"We'll sort something out for you, I promise. Don't forget your advent calendar."

Julie tucks my hair behind my ear.

I get out of the car and lean down towards the window. I nearly say something. I nearly say, 'Thanks, I know you want to help, it's not your fault'. I nearly tell her how I

really feel and ask for help, but I can't quite do it. The weight of all that's happened is pushing on my chest. So instead I tap on the glass.

"Go easy on the mince pies, Julie," I say.

I turn and walk away.



When I get back to my room, I pull out my rucksack from under the bed. It's my Grab-and-Go Bag, for escape in the event of catastrophe. Dad would be proud of me. *Always have your Grab-and-Go Bag. That's the Rule.*

I pull out my emergency plan, my hands shaking slightly. It's short. Options in the event of imminent disaster are to stay put and fortify, or bug out and go. I choose the second. I'll be well away from Dad if he turns up here at Beechwood. My plan has the address of an empty holiday cottage hundreds of miles away in Northumberland and how to get there. It belongs to Phil and Sue, foster carers from when Mum was in hospital. I can't go back to any of the places we used to live in Somerset or Wales – either Dad already knows them or he could easily find out now. Our last home, the farm, I'm *never* going back there. Phil and Sue's place, The Haven, is somewhere I came to *after* that life with Dad ended. And even if he manages to get hold of information from social services, a holiday home would never have been recorded in the chaos of my file.

I retrieve the cash I've stashed; notes pressed carefully

inside my hardback edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*. I've been picking up money from the more careless sixth formers who don't lock up their rooms properly. My contingency fund. I write a note for Mrs Maz the relief matron, signing it from Julie. I say that I'm on an unexpected weekend visit to old foster parents and will be back in time for school on Monday morning.

Phones are too easily traced so I switch mine off and wedge it at the back of my drawer. There's no one I need to call. No one who will be worried about me except in a purely professional capacity. I have a brief pang of concern for Julie – she might get into trouble or might genuinely worry about me. But she'll get over it.

Some of the people here are the closest things to friends I've had for a while, but let's get real: I won't be missed. I've been hanging out with Sophie mostly. A girl who's been chucked out of some of the best schools in Britain, smokes twenty a day without anyone ever catching her and can swear in her posh, little-girl voice in a way that cracks me up. She's taken on the job of filling in the gaps in my cultural education and I try to show interest in the Netflix shows she wants to talk about. She'll find a new project after I'm gone.

I scan my room for anything else I want to take. I'm not big on clothes. Sophie jokes that I look like an undertaker's apprentice because I wear so much black. The fact that I rarely smile probably has something to do with it too.

I like being the girl who doesn't stand out, the girl nobody notices. Being inconspicuous can keep you alive. I tie my hair in a low ponytail, put on a beanie hat and add a big scarf that can cover half my face. I pack my decent waterproofs and wear my usual black coat with a deep hood. I don't want to look like I'm walking in the mountains – I'm just a teenage girl catching a train to family. Normal. Average.

At the last minute, I pick up Julie's advent calendar. I open the first window to reveal a tiny 'Letter to Santa'. Ironic. Dad's letter came with the major implication that I am on the naughty list, for being quite so difficult to find. Thanks to him, I've now got no idea where I'll be by the time the rest of the cheap, glittery card windows are open.

I shouldn't bring the advent calendar. It serves no purpose.

I pack it in my bag.



Thirty minutes' brisk walk gets me to the station. I need to think ahead, that's one of the Rules: think how this will look to anyone trying to find me. I buy two tickets, exactly as set out in my emergency plan. First, I get a single to Cardiff from the bored man at the counter, using my bank card. Julie knows about my bank account – she helped me set it up. I make a meal of it, spending ages looking for my purse, asking inane questions about things to visit there so that he's more likely to remember me. I buy a second

ticket for Edinburgh from the machine out of sight of the counter, feeding notes carefully into the slot. My dad came to think all state authorities were out to get him, tracking his movements, prying into his finances and his irregular immigration status. So I'm well trained in concealing my data trail. Or laying a fake one.

I wait for the train in the ladies' toilets, away from any platform cameras. I dive into a cubicle when a woman enters – and then tell myself not to be so jumpy, to pull myself together, not to draw attention. No one is coming to take me back to school. As my train finally pulls in to the platform, I merge with other passengers and hop on, hood up. I change platforms at Bath, tagging along behind a noisy group of tourists and their wheelie cases.

Pulling into London past midnight, I spend hours drifting between rundown 24-hour fast-food places to keep warm while I wait for the first train north. I don't use a bank card, just cash, and only if I'm getting the evils from the staff and have to buy something to stop them kicking me out into the cold. This cash has to last me. I drink fizzy drinks and strong coffee to stay awake to keep an eye on my stuff.

It's easier to do all this if you've trained your whole life for it. But I need to add a new worst-case scenario to the list of emergency events we planned for – not one Dad ever mentioned. *Running from him.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Charlie Matters

Tracy Darnton is an award-winning author of books for children and young people. Her debut novel, *The Truth About Lies*, was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. Tracy studied law at Cambridge and worked as a solicitor and law lecturer before enrolling on the Bath Spa MA Writing for Young People, from which she graduated with Distinction. Amber from *The Rules* first appeared in Tracy's short story, 'The Letter', for which she won the Stripes YA Short Story Prize, run in partnership with The Bookseller's YA Book Prize, and was published in the YA anthology *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. Tracy lives in Bath with her husband and two sons – and a large Grab-and-Go Bag.

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