

Home is where
the **harm** is ...

little
girl
gone

ALEXANDRA
BURT



Alexandra Burt

Little Girl Gone: The can't-put-it-down psychological thriller

«HarperCollins»

Burt A.

Little Girl Gone: The can't-put-it-down psychological thriller /
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****Read the must-have Sunday Times bestseller today. GONE GIRL meets THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN in this stunning, unsettling psychological thriller.**** A baby goes missing. But does her mother want her back? When Estelle's baby daughter is taken from her cot, she doesn't report her missing. Days later, Estelle is found in a wrecked car, with a wound to her head and no memory. Estelle knows she holds the key to what happened that night – but what she doesn't know is whether she was responsible...

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Copyright

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For all mothers, especially mine.

For all daughters, especially mine.

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Part One

MISSING: 7-MONTH-OLD INFANT DISAPPEARS FROM CRIB

Brooklyn, NY – The New York City Police Department is asking for the public's help in locating 7-month-old Mia Connor.

The parents and the NYPD are pleading to the public for any assistance in the investigation and are asking residents in the North Dandry neighborhood in Brooklyn to come forward if they witnessed any suspicious behavior on the night and early morning of the 26th.

Mia Connor was last seen by her mother Estelle Paradise (27) around midnight when she laid her down to sleep. The mother discovered the child was missing when she woke up the next morning. The father was out of town when the infant disappeared.

'It's very frustrating,' said Eric Rodriguez, spokesperson for NYPD, when he appeared briefly at a news conference on Friday. 'We're hoping somebody will come forward and give us the information allowing us to locate the child.'

Immediately call the TIPS hotline at 1-888-267-4880 if you have any information about the infant's whereabouts. All calls are strictly confidential.

Chapter 1

'Mrs Paradise?'

A voice sounds out of nowhere. My thoughts are sluggish, as if I'm running under water. I try and try but I'm not getting anywhere.

'Not stable. Eighty over sixty. And falling.'

Oh God, I'm still alive.

I move my legs, they respond, barely, but they respond. Light prowls its way into my eyes. I hear dogs barking, high pitched. They pant, their tags clatter.

'You've been in a car accident.'

My face is numb, my thoughts vague, like dusty boxes in obscure and dark attic spaces. I know immediately something is amiss.

'Oh my God, look at her head.'

A siren sounds, it stutters for a second, then turns into a steady torment.

I want to tell them ... I open my mouth, my lips begin to form the words, but the burning sensation in my head becomes unbearable. My chest is on fire, and ringing in my left ear numbs the entire side of my face.

Let me die, I want to tell them. But the only sound I hear is of crude hands tearing fragile fabric.

'Step back. Clear.'

My body explodes, jerks upward.

This isn't part of the plan.

When I come to, my vision is blurred and hazy. I make out a woman in baby-blue scrubs, a nurse, slipping a plastic tube over my head and immediately two prongs hiss cold air into my nostrils.

She pumps a lever and the bed yanks upward, then another lever triggers a motor raising the headboard until my upper body is resting almost vertically.

My world becomes clearer. The nurse's hair is in a ponytail and the pockets of her cardigan sag. I watch her dispose of tubing and wrappers and the closing of the trashcan's metal lid sounds final, evoking a feeling I can't quite place, a vague sense of loss, like a pickpocket making off with my loose change, disappearing into the crowd that is my strange memory.

A male voice sounds out of nowhere.

'I need to place a central line.'

The overly gentle voice belongs to a man in a white coat. He talks to me as if I'm a child in need of comfort.

'Just relax, you won't feel a thing.'

Relax and I won't feel a thing? Easy for him to say. I feel lost somehow, as if I'm in the middle of a blizzard, unable to decide which direction to turn. I lift my arms and pain shoots from my shoulder into my neck. I tell myself not to do that again anytime soon.

The white coat wipes the back of my hand with an alcohol wipe. It leaves an icy trail and pulls me further from my lulled state. I watch the doctor insert a long needle into my vein. A forgotten cotton wipe rests in the folds of the cotton waffle weave blanket, in its center a bright red bloody mark, like a scarlet letter.

There's a spark of memory, it ignites but then fizzles, like a wet match. I refuse to be pulled away, I follow the crimson, attach myself to the memory that started out like a creak on the stairs, but then the monsters appear.

First I remember the darkness.

Then I remember the blood.

My baby. Oh God, Mia.

The blood lingers. There's flashes of crimson exploding like lightning in the sky, one moment they're illuminating everything around me, the next they are gone, bathing my world in darkness. Then the bloody images fade and vanish, leaving a black jittering line on the screen.

Squeaking rubber soles on linoleum circle me and I feel a pat on my shoulder.

This isn't real. A random vision, just a vision. It doesn't mean anything.

A nurse gently squeezes my shoulder and I open my eyes.

'Mrs Paradise,' the nurse's voice is soft, almost apologetic. 'I'm sorry, but I have orders to wake you every couple of hours.'

'Blood,' I say, and squint my eyes, attempting to force the image to return to me. 'I don't understand where all this blood's coming from.' Was that my voice? It can't be mine, it sounds nothing like me.

'Blood? What blood?' The nurse looks at my immaculately taped central line. 'Are you bleeding?'

I turn towards the window. It's dark outside. The entire room appears in the window's reflection, like an imprint, a not-quite true copy of reality.

'Oh God,' I say and my high-pitched voice sounds like a screeching microphone. 'Where's my daughter?'

She just cocks her head and then busies herself straightening the blanket. 'Let me get the doctor for you,' she says and leaves the room.

Chapter 2

Voices enter my room like a slow drift of clouds, merging with the scent of pancakes, syrup, toast, and coffee, making my stomach churn. I feel a hand on my arm.

'Mrs Paradise? I'm Dr Baker.'

I judge only his age – he is young – as if my brain does not allow me to appraise him further. Have I met him before? I don't know. Everything about me, my body and my senses, is faulty. When did I become so forgetful, so scatterbrained?

He wears a white coat with his name stitched on the pocket: *Dr Jeremy Baker*. He retrieves a pen from his coat and shines a light into my eyes. There's an explosion so painful I clench my eyelids shut. I turn my head away from him, reach up and feel the left side of my head. Now I understand why the world around me is muffled; my entire head is bandaged.

'You're at County Medical. An ambulance brought you to the emergency room about ...' He pauses and looks at his wristwatch. I wonder why the time matters. Is he counting the hours, does he want to be exact? '... on the fifth, three days ago.'

Three days? And I don't remember a single minute.

Ask him, go ahead, ask him. 'Where's my daughter?'

'You were in a car accident. You have a head injury and you've been in a medically induced coma.'

Accident? I don't remember any accident. He didn't answer my question. He talks to me as if I'm incapable of comprehending more elaborate sentences.

'They found you in your car in a ravine. You have a concussion, fractured ribs, and multiple contusions around your lower extremities. You also had a critical head injury when they brought you in. Your brain was swollen, which was the reason for the induced coma.'

I don't remember any accident. What about Jack? Yes, Mia's with Jack. She must be. One more time. 'Was my daughter in the car with me?'

'You were alone,' he says.

'She's with Jack? Mia's with my husband?'

'Everything's going to be okay.'

The blood was just a vision, it wasn't real. She's with Jack, she's safe. Thank God. *Everything's going to be okay*, he said.

'We're not sure of any brain damage at this point, but now that you've regained consciousness we'll be able to perform all the necessary tests to figure out what's going on.' He motions the nurse who has been standing next to him. 'You lost a lot of blood and we had to administer fluids to stabilize you. The swelling will go down in a few days but in the meantime we need to make sure you keep your lungs clear of fluids.'

He picks up a contraption and holds it up in front of me. 'This is a spirometer. Basically you keep the red ball suspended as long as you can. The nurse will give you detailed instructions. Every two hours, please.' His last comment is directed towards the nurse.

The gurgling in my chest is uncomfortable and I try not to cough. The pain in my left side must be the fractured ribs. I wonder how I'll be able to stay awake for two hours or wake up every two hours or use this contraption for two hours, or whatever he just said.

'Before I forget,' Dr Baker looks down at me. He is quiet for a while and I wonder if I missed a question. Then he lowers his voice. 'Two detectives were here to talk to you. I won't allow any questioning until we've done a few more tests.' He nods to the nurse and walks towards the door, then turns around and offers one more trifle of news. 'Your husband will be here soon. In the meantime can we call anyone for you? Family? A friend? Anybody?'

I shake my head 'no' and immediately regret it. A mallet pounds against my skull from the inside. My head is a giant swollen bulb and the throbbing in my ear manages to distract me from my aching ribs.

My lids have a life of their own. I'm nodding off but I have so many questions. I take a deep breath as if I'm preparing to jump off a diving board. It takes everything I have to sound out the words.

'Where did this accident happen?'

Why does he look at me puzzled? Am I missing more than I'm aware of?

'I'm sorry, but I can't tell you much about the accident,' he says. He sounds subdued, as if he's forcing himself to be composed in order to calm me. 'All we know is that your car was found upstate at the bottom of a ravine.' Pause. 'You have a lot of injuries. Some are from the accident. Can you remember what happened?'

I reflect on his words, really think them over. Accident. Nothing. Not a thing. There's a large black hole where my memory used to be.

'I can't remember anything,' I say.

His brows furrow. 'You mean ... the accident?'

The accident. He talks about *the* accident as if I remember. I want to tell him to X-ray my head, and that he'll find a dark shadow within my skull where my memory used to be.

I'm getting the hang of this; concentrate, think of the question and repeat it in your head, take a deep breath, then speak.

'You don't understand. I don't remember *the* accident and I don't remember anything *before* the accident.'

'Do you remember wanting to harm yourself?'

'Harm myself?'

I would remember that, wouldn't I? What is he talking about? I'm getting frustrated. We're going in circles. It's difficult to stay awake.

'Either that or you were shot.'

Was I shot or did I harm myself? What kind of questions is he asking me?

I turn my head as far to the left as possible, catching a glimpse of an outstretched leg of a police officer sitting by the door, out in the hallway. Hardly normal procedure. I wonder what that's all about.

Dr Baker looks over his shoulder and then faces me again. He steps closer and lowers his voice. 'You don't remember.' He states it matter of factly, no longer a question, but a realization.

'I don't know what I don't know,' I say. That's kind of funny, when I think about it. I giggle and his brows furrow.

Then he tells me about my voice. How it is 'monotone' and that I have 'a reduction in range and intensity of emotions,' and that my reactions are 'flat and blunted.'

I don't understand what he's telling me. Should I smile more, be more cheerful? I want to ask him but then I hear a word that puts it all to rest.

'Amnesia,' he says. 'We're not sure about the cause yet. Retrograde, maybe post-traumatic. Maybe even trauma related.'

When you hear *amnesia* from a man in a white coat it's serious. Final. *I forgot*, sounds casual, *oh, I'm forgetful*.

I have amnesia, I'm not forgetful after all. Is he going to ask me what year it is? Who the President is? If I remember my birthdate? That's what they do in movies. I don't have to rack my brain, I know the answers. But why don't I remember the accident? What else did I forget?

'Retrograde means you don't recall events that happened *just before* the onset of the memory loss. Post-traumatic is a cognitive impairment, and memory loss can stretch back hours or days, sometimes even longer. Eventually you'll recall the distant past but you may never recover what happened just prior to your accident. Amnesia can't be diagnosed with an X-ray, like a broken bone. We've done an MRI test and a CAT scan. Both tests came back inconclusive. Basically there's no

definitive proof of brain damage, but absence of proof is not proof of absence. There could be microscopic damages and the MRI and the CAT scan are just not sophisticated enough to detect those. Nerve fiber damage doesn't show up on either test.'

I remain silent, not sure if I should ask anything else, not sure if I even understood him at all. All I grasp is that he can't tell me anything definitive, so what's the point?

'There's the possibility that you suffer from dissociative amnesia. Trauma would cause you to block out certain information associated with the event. There's no test for that either. You'd have to see a psychiatrist or a psychologist. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The neurologist will order some more tests. Like I said, time will tell.'

I take a deep breath. The medical facts he's relaying to me are one thing, but I just can't shake the feeling that there's something he is not telling me.

'They found me where again?'

'In a ravine, in Dover, upstate. You were transferred here from Dover Medical Center.'

Dover? Dover. Nothing. I'm blank.

'I've never been to Dover.'

'That's where they found you, you just don't remember. It's part of the memory loss.' He slips the pen back in his coat pocket. 'You were lucky,' he adds. He holds up his index finger and thumb, indicating the extent of the luck I had. 'The bullet was this far from doing serious harm. There is extensive damage to your ear but I want you to remember that you were really lucky. Remember that.'

Remember that. How funny. My hand moves up to my ear, almost like a reflex. 'You said there's damage to my ear. What happened to it?'

He pauses ever so slightly. 'Gone. Completely gone. The area was infected and we had to make a decision.' He watches me intently. 'It could have been worse, like I said, you were lucky.'

'That's some luck,' I say but when I think about my ear I don't really care.

'There's reconstructive surgery.'

'What's there now, I mean, is there a hole?'

'There's a small opening draining fluids, other than that, there's a flap of skin stretched over the wound.'

An opening that drains fluids. I'm oddly untouched by the fact that a flap of skin is stretched over a hole in my head where my ear used to be. I have amnesia. I forgot to lock my car. I lost my umbrella. My ear is gone. It's all the same; insignificant.

'And you call that lucky?'

'You're alive, that's what counts.'

There's that buzzing sound again and then his voice goes from loud to muffled, as if someone's turned a volume dial.

'What about my ear?'

He looks at me, puzzled.

'I remember you told me it was gone.' *Completely gone*, were the words he used. 'I mean my hearing, what about my hearing? Everything sounds muffled.'

'We did an electrophysiological hearing test while you were unconscious.' He grabs my file from the nightstand and opens it. He flips through the pages. 'You've lost some audio capacity, but nothing major. We'll order more tests, depending on the next CAT scan, we just have to wait it out.'

'My ear, did that happen during the accident?'

'They recovered a gun in the car. They are not sure how the injury came about, if someone shot you or you shot yourself. Hopefully you'll remember soon.'

Bullet. Was shot or I did I shoot myself? That explains the police officer sitting outside my door and I wonder if he's guarding me or if he's guarding someone from me. This talk of bullets and guns and ravines, my missing ear. I'm blank, completely blank. Except ...

'I remembered something.'

The words come spilling out and take on a life of their own.

'I need to know if what I see ... I ... I think I remember bits and pieces, but it's not like a memory, it's more like fragments.' It's like flipping through a photo album not knowing if it's mine or someone else's life. *Blood. So much blood.*

'It's a humpty dumpty kind of a situation, maybe you just can't put it back together. You may not be able to remember minute by minute, but you'll be able to generally connect the dots at some point.'

All the king's horses and all the king's men. Wild horses. I make a decision. The blood was just an illusion. A figment.

'I'm very tired,' I say and feel relieved.

'Let the nurse know if there's anybody you want us to call. Don't forget the spirometer – every two hours ...'

He points at something behind me. 'Behind you is a PCA pump. It delivers small amounts of pain medication. If you need more,' he puts a small box with a red button in my hand, 'just push the red button and you'll get one additional dose of morphine. The safety feature only allows for a maximum amount during a certain timed interval. Any questions?'

I have learned my lesson from earlier and barely shake my head.

I watch him leave the room and immediately a nurse enters and I try to concentrate on her explaining the yellow contraption to me. I'm supposed to breathe into the tubing until a ball moves up, and I have to breathe continuously to try to keep the ball suspended as long as possible. Because there's fluids in my lungs.

I have amnesia. My ear is gone. I feel ... I feel as if I'm not connecting like I should. I should yell and scream, raise bloody hell, but Dr Baker's explanations of my lack of emotions, 'blunted affect' he called it, seems logical. Logic I can handle, it's the emotions that remain elusive.

There's something they're not telling me. Maybe because they don't subject injured people – especially those who've been shot, who lost an ear, who were *that close* – to any additional bad news. That must be it. Maybe the police will tell me, or Jack, once he gets here. They already told me I've been robbed of hours of my life, how much worse can it get?

I hold the spirometer in my right hand. I blow into the tube and allow my mind to go blank while I watch the red ball go up. It lingers for whatever amount of time I manage to keep it suspended. I pinch my eyes shut to will the ball to maintain its suspension. Suddenly bits and pieces of images come into focus – the empty crib, the missing bottles – as if they are captured on the back of my eyelids. My mind explodes. It disintegrates, breaks into tiny particles.

Mia isn't with Jack. She's gone.

The realization occurs so abruptly and is so powerful that the wires connected to my chest seem to tremble and the machines behind me pick up on it. The beeps speed up like the hooves of a horse, walking, then trotting, then breaking into a full blown gallop. Mia's disappearance is a fact, yet it is disconnected from whatever consequences it entails, there's a part I can't connect with. An empty crib. Missing clothes, her missing bottles and diapers, everything was gone. I looked for her and couldn't find her. I went to the police and then there's a dark hole.

Like a jigsaw puzzle I study the pieces, connect them, tear them apart and start all over again. I remember going to the police precinct but after that it gets blurry – hazy, like a childhood memory. My mind plays a game of 'Chinese whispers,' thoughts relaying messages, then retelling them skewed. Easily misinterpreted, embellished, unreliable.

Every time I watch the spirometer ball move upwards, more images form; a bathroom stall, a mop, a stairwell, pigeons, the smell of fresh paint. Then a picture fades in, as if someone has turned up a light dimmer: fragments of celestial bodies; a sun, a moon, and stars. So many stars.

Why was I in Dover? Where is my daughter and why is no one talking about her?

As I lie in the hospital bed, I am aware of time passing, a fleeting glimpse of light outside, day turning into night, and back into day. I long for ... a tidbit of my childhood, a morsel of memory,

of how my mother cared for me when I was sick, in bed with the flu or some childhood disease, like measles or chickenpox. But then I recall having been a robust child, a child that was hardy and resistant to viruses, to strep throats and pink eyes.

I don't know what to tell Jack once he shows up. They told him Mia is missing and he will question me. Jack will return from Chicago, he will ask questions, many questions. He will want to know about the day Mia disappeared. About the morning I found her crib empty. Amnesia is just another shortcoming of a long list of my other countless inadequacies. Shortfall after shortfall.

I must be insane, for the only explanation I can come up with is of my daughter and my ear, together in the same place. And above them, floating suspended like a mobile, the sun, the moon, and the stars. Bright as bright can be, surrounded by darkness. A chaotic universe illuminated by heavenly bodies.

I rest my hands on my lap. My body stills, comes to a halt. I was in an accident. I was shot or tried to harm myself. My ear is gone. There's a hole that's draining fluids.

I don't care about any of that. Mia's gone. I can't even bear the thought of her. I want the pain to stop yet her image remains. I raise my finger to push the red PCA button, longing for the lulled state the medicine provides. I hesitate, then I put the box down. I have to think, start somewhere. The empty crib. The dots. I have to connect the dots.

Chapter 3

After Mia was born I relived her birth every single night; her first gasp triggered by the cold birthing room, that gasp turning into a deep breath, then a desperate cry escaping her lips, her attempt to negotiate the inevitable transition between my womb and the outside world.

And every morning I realized that her actual cries reached me deep in my dreams and I woke up feeling like a million tiny bombs exploded inside my head. Then my muscle memory kicked in. *Wake up, get up, feed her, change her, bathe her, rock her, hold her. Feeding and changing and bathing and rocking and holding.*

I had stopped keeping track of time, the date or even the days of the week. I was unaware of whatever events might be gripping the rest of the world and I hadn't picked up a book or a magazine in months. My life was reduced to a process of consolidating motor tasks into memory, loop-like days and repetitive responsibilities performed without any conscious effort.

As I rose from the couch, the world spun and then stilled. I listened for the echoes of Mia's colicky morning cries, by then seven months after her birth, hundredfold replicas of her initial primal moment that visited me in my dreams. Lately her cries had been reaching me time delayed, distorted almost, as if communicating a certain distance between us.

That morning, I listened, yet the house remained silent. A sense of normality enveloped me, an image of a round-cheeked child pressed against the mattress manifested itself, an elfin body heavy with peaceful sleep. I had been waiting for this moment when Mia would wake up and not begin to scream before she even opened her eyes. Maybe today was the day, the end of her colic, the end of her constant crying?

I debated rolling over, going back to sleep, but something irked me. Shouldn't there be cooing, babbling strung-together sounds? Usually by this time, Mia was attempting to pull herself up by the bars of the crib, her eyes rimmed with tears and rage.

Barefoot down the hallway I went and paused by her door, still ajar. I had forgotten to take my watch off the night prior and the band had left an imprint as if I had been tied up all night. It was just before nine and I'd been asleep for an unprecedented continuous six hours.

Mia's door was cracked just as I had left it hours ago. Opening it wide enough to pass through, I entered the room. Something jabbed at me, made my heart stumble.

The Tinker Bell mobile overhead, unbalanced and lopsided, somehow imperfect, and disturbed. The room, barely lit by the sunlight spilling through the window, soundless. Her crib in front of the window. Silent and abandoned. Not so much as an imprint of her body on the sheets.

Pyrotechnics went off in my brain. I was trapped in the twilight zone, something that *cannot* be, I'm clearly looking at it. How can she be gone? My molars pulsed as I inspected the windows and rattled the cast-iron bars. I searched the entire apartment, rechecked every window twice. Not a trace of her.

I ran to the front door. The locks were intact, the metal still scratched, the paint still chipped, signs of my clumsy attempt to install a deadbolt. All locks were engaged and everything was where and how it was supposed to be. Except Mia.

There was no proof that anyone had been here – no footprints on the floor, no items left behind – nothing was disturbed, yet this peculiar energy hovered around me. The apartment seemed physically undisturbed, but felt ransacked at the same time.

I realized the contradiction of the moment: Mia was gone, yet there was no evidence, no clue, that someone had taken her. No shards on the floor, no gaping doors, no curtains blowing in the breeze of a window left ajar. No haphazardly bunched-up sheet, no pacifier, no toy discarded on the floor.

9-1-1.

I ran to the kitchen, took the receiver off the wall mount, and stopped dead in my tracks. The dish rack was empty. No bottle, no collar, no nipple. No formula can, no measuring cup.

I rushed to the trash. Surely her soiled diapers must still be in there. The can was empty, even the plastic liner was gone.

I ripped open the fridge. All the prefilled formula bottles I had prepared the night before were gone.

Back in her room, the shelves of the changing table, usually stacked with diapers and blankets, were empty. The closet door was wide open, not a hanger dangling, not a shoe left on the closet floor.

I pulled the dresser drawers open. All her clothes were gone. Every single drawer of the dresser empty. Not a button or a tag tucked in a corner. The basket on top of the dresser, where I kept the diapers and the ointment, was empty. Nothing but empty pieces of furniture.

I checked every inch of her room, every drawer, every corner of her closet. My heart dropped into my intestines. Not only was Mia gone, but so was every trace of her.

The 70th Precinct on Lawrence Avenue in Brooklyn was a five-minute walk from North Dandry. As I passed through the building's glass doors, the front desk clerk lifted his index finger, pointed at the earpiece, indicating he was talking on the phone.

A janitor pushed a neon yellow bucket and a scraggly mop across the floor. He wore blue overalls and clear booties over his white sneakers. I watched him as he wheeled the bucket across the linoleum, mopping in circular motions, dipping the mop in the wringer and squeezing out the water.

I studied my reflection in the glass door and saw a woman rocking back and forth with the movement of the mop, cotton strings slithering over the floor, *wipe, dip, wring, wipe, dip, wring*.

Standing there, it was just me and the sound of my beating heart. I had rehearsed this moment countless times. What I was going to say, which words I was going to use – missing implied a moment of inattention, kidnapped was all wrong because I didn't see anyone snatch her – *I can't find my daughter* the perfect choice of words.

Footsteps jerked me back into reality. Behind me, simultaneously a door opened and a phone rang. A detective in slacks and a light-blue shirt, his tie tucked into his waistband, walked up to the counter. He was holding a short, skinny man by his tattooed upper arm. The man was almost catatonic. The detective gave him a shove to move him along, making the man's chest hit the edge of the counter. The man had a crooked smile on his face and seemed indifferent, as if he had been through this too many times to care.

'Get an officer to take him to booking,' the detective said to the clerk. 'I don't want to see his face again until he's sobered up.'

'I need to speak to someone.' My voice was loud, so loud it made the clerk look up from the phone. 'Please, I need help.'

'Just a minute,' the detective said. 'I'll be with you as soon as I can.' He was too far away for me to make out his name on the tag clipped to his shirt pocket. He seemed young, maybe too young. *Will he understand me, is he a father, has he worked with missing children before? I wonder if I should ask for a more experienced detective.*

'I need to talk to someone,' I repeated, even louder than before.

He stepped closer, reluctantly. 'How can I help you?'

Words sped through my mind, then images of locks emerged, doors secured with bolts, hasps and locksets.

HELP, I screamed in my mind. I opened my mouth but no words emerged. I swallowed hard, the gulp in my throat echoed through the silent precinct hallways. I wanted to confess to whatever it was I had done, *must have done*, for no one disappears through locked doors or walls, especially not a baby.

Nausea overcame me. I welcomed the strangled retching, wanted to let go of the words, the confession of what I must have done. I refused to fight the heaviness in my throat. Saliva collected in my mouth and instinctively I pinched my nose to keep the vomit from ejecting through my nostrils.

He stepped backward, as if I was a contagious leper. 'There's a bathroom right over there,' the detective pointed towards a door less than ten feet away.

The bathroom was vacant. I knelt in the stall and on all fours I convulsed with spasms. Ripples shook my body, my cold skin was covered in a layer of sweat. As I studied my reflection in the mirror, I rummaged through my mind for an explanation, never lifting my gaze off the stranger that stared back at me. I felt fury for the woman in the mirror, a woman with unwashed hair, her eyes sunken in and sad, the woman who had replaced the real me. I willed myself to leave the bathroom and to do what I had come here for; ask for help to find Mia.

Back in the hallway, the detective was waiting for me. 'Ma'am?' He seemed impatient, as if dealing with someone who had no real police business after all.

I didn't know what to tell the detective anymore. Had someone walked through brick walls, had some ill-fated Houdini act occurred while I was sleeping? When a magician pulls an endless scarf out of a hat, everybody knows it's a simple trick, but this was real. And I didn't know if I was a victim or if I was guilty. A crime has been committed. But what kind of crime?

I don't know where my daughter is.

An all-encompassing statement, implicating everything possible but not implying anything specific. No fault, no crime, no blame. Just a fact.

I don't know where my daughter is.

I couldn't fathom a single logical way of explaining how Mia had disappeared.

Say it, I kept telling myself, *say it. JUST SAY IT.* I pushed myself to speak but the woman I had become didn't comply. There was nothing anyone could do for her.

No one can help me. No one can help me. No one can help me.

Like an oath, I repeated it three times, hoping the reiteration would conjure up some sort of sense and logic.

As I looked past the detective, down the hallway, the tattooed man from earlier darted for the front door. The detective's eyes followed him and then he ran after him. The tattooed man, unsteady on his feet, had reached the glass door by the time the detective got a hold of him.

I focused on the floor and the tiny specks in the blue linoleum. I felt my knees weakening, I had to keep moving, keep the blood circulating through my body.

No one can help me.

I exited the precinct and kept on walking. I felt numb inside, anesthetized, yet somehow purged, ready to accept the facts. The numbness dissolved long enough to allow the gravity of what I must have done to sink in. As I passed a store window, out of the corner of my eye I saw a woman studying her hands as if she hadn't seen them in a long time.

In that brief yet gruesome moment of clarity I realized those hands might just be the hands of a monster.

Chapter 4

Jack arrives and he's all business; his suit, his posture, his demeanor. The thing that strikes me is how in control he is. I used to crave his attention, his company. But not only am I disgusted by him, I can't even conceive of ever having had feelings for him.

My hands shake at first, then my whole body trembles. Whether with fear or anger I don't know. I fix my gaze on his anxious face. He whispers, yet his words pierce through me.

'I came straight from the airport. I can't even wrap my mind around this. What the hell happened?'

His comment feels familiar. Not the words, but the feeling it evokes. I've been belittled so many times. So many faux pas committed by me – little ones first, then major ones.

'Someone took her, Jack.'

'What do you mean someone took her? Where were you?' He slides his briefcase across the nightstand sending a plastic cup tumbling over the edge and to the ground. 'What the hell is going on?'

'Jack, I—'

He swipes his hand through the air as if to dismiss me when I open my mouth. 'Who loses a baby, Estelle? Who? Tell me who loses a baby?'

I press my lips together.

'I leave for a couple of weeks and you get in an accident in ... Dover? That's hours from here! What were you doing there?'

I don't dare make eye contact with him.

'Why did you take her to Dover?'

The beeping and buzzing of machines behind me is the only sound in the room. 'I didn't, Jack, that's the thing, I don't know why I was even there.'

'I was questioned by the police – no, wait – questioned isn't the right word ...' His face twitches, then he steps closer. He lifts his index finger as if to scold me like a child, 'I was *interrogated*. I was detained at the airport, taken to the police station and interrogated like a common criminal. Just what did you tell them?'

'I didn't tell them anything. I haven't even spoken to police—'

'I was questioned by police.'

'They always question the parents first, you know that.'

'I was treated like a suspect. I've never been so humiliated in my life. Once my boss gets wind of this ...' He doesn't finish the sentence. 'Where is she? Tell me where she is?'

'She's missing, Jack!' I'm alarmed by the distance in his eyes. I want to cry but that would only make him angrier. All this time with Jack has paid off. I've learned to hold back my tears.

'I know she's missing, they're searching for her. I want to know how it happened, tell me everything. I talked to the police and the doctors, but I want to hear it from you.'

I start with how I found the empty crib. How it was a Sunday and none of the workers were in the house, it was empty and quiet. Lieberman was out of town, like every weekend. How nothing made sense. How I went to the police and left without saying anything. Jack doesn't say, 'It's going to be okay' or 'we'll sort it out.' He just says, 'Go on.'

When I'm done, he shakes his head. 'I should've never left town. Never. You fooled me. You told me you were okay and I believed you. Did you leave her somewhere? Tell me where you left her.'

Jack's got it all figured out, like always. In his world you put one foot in front of the other and you're sure to arrive anywhere you want to be.

'Jack—'

'You promised me, *promised me*, you were okay, and now look at what you've done.'

'I'm sorry, Jack. I'm so sorry.' I don't know what I'm sorry for but it seems like the proper thing to say.

'Sorry isn't going to cut it. My daughter is gone. *Gone*. Did that sink in yet?'

'I wish I knew what happened. All I know is she was gone when I woke up.'

'You don't know where you left her?'

'No, I didn't leave her *anywhere*. I don't know where she is.'

'Did you leave her with a sitter? Did you leave her at an overnight daycare? Maybe—'

'No, no, there was no sitter. No daycare.'

'I should've known something was going to happen. I never should've ...' He doesn't finish the sentence.

Remember, a change of scenery would do me good, you said. It would be like starting over, you said. I believed you, Jack. I thought I could leave the other woman, the one who had taken over my life, I could leave her behind. But she followed me.

'None of this makes any sense.' Suddenly his face relaxes. 'You've been acting strangely ever since you had Mia. Either I worked too much or I slept too late. Nothing was ever right. I'm starting to think this was your plan all along.'

'My plan? What plan?'

'Yeah, you land a lawyer, get married, have a baby, divorce him, and get alimony and child support. *That* plan.'

'You're the jackpot and I'm the gold digger? We're broke, remember? You took this job in Chicago because we are broke.'

'I'm just trying to understand what happened. I've done nothing but support you. What happened to you, Estelle? Did you wake up one day and just say to yourself, *fuck Jack, fuck Mia, fuck everything*? Just like that? I've done everything you wanted me to do, given you everything you've ever wanted. Now it's time to do something for me.'

I just look at him.

'Tell me the truth. We can still fix this.'

'I was in an accident. I have amnesia. I don't know what happened.' My voice is monotone, like a robot, repeating a prerecorded statement.

'Let's assume you really don't remember, let's entertain that for a minute, then explain to me how you don't call me. Explain that to me. I'm her father, how do you not call me? Was this another one of your crazy moments?'

'My crazy moments?'

'One of those moments when you go off the deep end. When you can't hold the baby, when you can't stop crying, when you follow me to my office, when you go through my stuff, when you can't pick up the phone, can't dial 9-1-1! One of those moments. Do I need to go on?'

Everything in his world is either black or white. The scary thing is that I have to agree with him, I wasn't good for anything. I tried to be a good mother, I tried to do what mothers do. I wish I could make him understand how hard I tried.

'Everything okay in here?' We turn towards the door where a nurse stands, holding an empty tray.

'Sorry,' Jack says and I nod in agreement. 'We'll keep it down. Everything's all right.'

Jack doesn't like to be told how loud he can speak. He lowers his voice but the look in his eyes makes up for contained his rage.

'There's a cop sitting outside. Do you get how serious this is?'

I nod.

'Any idea why he's here?' He doesn't wait for my answer and lowers his voice to a whisper. 'It's not for your protection.'

'What are you saying?' I ask and can't keep my voice from shaking.

'You need a criminal defense lawyer.'

I cringe at the word *criminal*.

'Jack, I'm not a criminal. I don't remember what happened. I'm beside myself!' Is it possible for a nonexistent ear to throb? I know my outbursts only reiterate the fact that, in his eyes, I've lost my mind. I know I must look like a deer right before the bumper makes contact.

'I woke up and she was gone. Everything was gone. That's *all* I remember.'

'Something must have happened. Did she cry and you got upset? Did you do something to her?'

I try to sit up but the pain in my ribs is excruciating.

'Look at me.' Jack steps closer and he grabs my chin, turning my head towards him. 'Look me in the eyes and tell me what happened.'

'Do you think I'd hurt our daughter?'

The candor of my question startles him. His eyes widen, but immediately he catches himself and lowers his voice to a whisper. 'I'm not saying you hurt her, all I'm saying is that I blame you for what happened.'

Jack opens his briefcase. 'One more thing,' he adds.

There is always one more thing with Jack.

'I'm not sure if you're getting this, but there's a possibility you'll spend the rest of your life behind bars or strapped to a gurney. Now is the time to grasp the severity of your situation.' He pinches his lips into a straight line and adds, 'I've talked to the doctors at length and if I can convince the DA, I'll get you into a clinic with a doctor who specializes in memory recovery. I don't see any other way, all I want to do is find my daughter.'

I stare at him, and then I lower my eyes.

'Where's this clinic?' I ask.

'Here in New York. The doctor, some foreigner from the Middle East, specializes in trauma-related memory loss.' His shoulders relax but even his expensive suit can't hide the fact that suddenly he looks like a deflated balloon. 'I need you to sign a voluntary admission to a psychiatric facility for an unspecified length of time.'

'I don't belong in a psych ward.' I attempt to organize my thoughts into separate, manageable portions. It barely seems possible. *Memory recovery*. I imagine wires hooked up to my brain, truth serums, and my retinas relaying images to computer screens. *A psychiatric facility. Unspecified amount of time*. I'm agreeing to go to a loony bin and I won't be able to check out.

Jack cocks his head and raises his brows as if he has caught a kid in a lie.

'In your eyes I'm just this crazy lunatic, right? Why don't you just say it? You think I'm crazy, don't you?'

'Not crazy in a certifiable sense, not crazy as in failing a psych exam, but I believe that you need help and that this clinic might just be your only chance. And most of all, it's Mia's only chance.'

His voice is soft now, almost seductive. 'I don't think you have any other choice. This is it.'

Jack has spoken, there's no alternative. He's right, this is Mia's only chance and so I force my legs off the side of the bed. My rubbery socks search for the sticky linoleum floor. I feel suspended, unable to find the ground. I sign my name in shaky letters and the second the pen rests, I feel an overwhelming urge to take it in my fist and scratch out my signature until the paper is torn to shreds.

Jack grabs the pen and pulls it from between my fingers and checks his watch.

'That doctor will help me remember and we'll find Mia. We'll find out what happened, right, Jack?'

He closes his briefcase and leaves the room before I can even get my feet on the ground.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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