

GONE
FOR
GOOD

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SARAH CROSSAN

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info@simonandschuster.nl

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For Daniel Crossan

PROLOGUE

BELLE

Belle Jackson was lost.

No cell phone, no compass, no flashlight.

The night was closing in.

She had a habit of humming when nervous,
though she didn't notice it herself.

Other kids would look up during tests,
frown until she stopped distracting them with relentless noise
or the teacher tutted, reprimanding her.

And she was humming, as she stumbled through the forest,
long red hair damp against her sweater.

When the August sun set,
the temperature in the High Peaks dropped drastically,
paid no heed to the sweat of the day.

But Belle was not wearing her warm coat,
only a thin jacket that belonged to someone else.

She shivered. Hadn't been careful enough.

Careless,

that's what her mother would have said.

Belle's hiking boots rubbed her shins.

She had cold hands, numb fingertips.

Hunger set in, then a mild panic
that the scratching nearby was a wild animal.

'Damn,' she muttered. 'Damn-damn-damn.'

Should she hide or shout?
She couldn't remember the rule,
but knew *not* to run:
predators chase runners; it is an innate instinct.
Then again, the noise could be a person,
and surely the easiest way out of the darkness
was with a companion.

In her head,
Belle made a list of potential dangers on the trail:
standing dead trees,
unexpected overlooks,
mudslides,
muzzleloaders,
rattlesnakes,
black bears,
hypothermia,
and men,
the ultimate apex-predators.

Belle was small for sixteen, but square-shouldered, undaunted.
She mowed lawns and pressure-washed her neighbours' decks
to make cash for the weekends.

So, she moved towards the sound.
Bold Belle Jackson.
Who was hoping only to be found.

Until she realised, too late, who had found her.

PART 1

MID-AUGUST

1

CONNIE

I am asleep.

Then suddenly awake.

A bright light and a flinty voice:

'Up and at 'em, baby.

Come on. Let's go. Let's go.'

What time is it? What's happening?

A man looks down at me disapprovingly.

Not the cops, but he's wearing

a uniform, handcuffs hanging from a utility belt.

Behind him a brawny woman is waiting,
fists on hips,

head to the side.

Also, in uniform.

'You're coming with us,' she says.

It is not a threat. It is a fact. Spoken coldly.

So, I scream, loud and long.

The walls in my house are thin.
Someone will hear. Someone will save me.

I scream again: louder and longer.

The man shakes his head. 'No one's home, baby.'

The digital clock on my bookshelf reads 03:38 am.
My sister Mae stayed over at a friend's last night.
But Dad and Wendy only went to the movies.
They should be home by now. 'Dad! DAD!' I shout.

Nothing. Silence.

'I told you. No one's home.'

'Have you hurt my father? Where is he?'

It's hard to speak, hard to breathe,
like I am being held

under
water.

'If you don't get dressed, we'll take you as you are.'

He holds up my backpack. 'We got everything you need.'

The woman waggles her flashlight at me,
blurring my vision for a second.

They are impatient, but not panicked,
not at all like criminals afraid of being discovered.

'I know where Dad's girlfriend keeps her jewellery,'
I tell them,
out of desperation. 'Don't hurt me.'

The woman snorts. 'Typical.
We don't want diamonds, princess.
We just wanna get paid.'

So
I bolt for the door
on trembling legs,
groggily,
in skin too tight,
and almost reach it.

Almost.

The man's arm is around my neck,
and I am
on the floor,
a knee in my back.

'Let me *go*,' I plead.

But it's too late. Handcuffs link my wrists.

Whether I like it or not, I'm going with them.
But where? Where the hell am I going?

•

‘Never let anyone take you to a second location.’
I heard this a long time ago,
from a detective on a documentary,
and held tight to his advice.

He said, ‘You are in danger if someone removes you
from the place you chose to be,
to a place *they* would like you to be,
where no one will find you,
where no one will hear you,
where that person can do with you,
whatever they wish.’

I always thought
that if the time came I would
scream,
scratch,
claw,
and bite,
to stop someone grabbing me.

In the back of their SUV I realise,
I’m a pathetic pushover.

I am already *in*
the second location.

They can do whatever they like with me.

•

'Who are you?
Where are you taking me?
Where's my family?'

From the back seat,
 my hands still tied, I study the road signs,
try to figure out where we're heading,
try to keep track of time,
try question after question
– my voice strange, piercing and strained,
 like someone else is speaking.

They do not answer.
They listen to the radio and grumble about traffic
as though nothing harrowing at all is happening.

What the hell *is* happening?

•

We drive for hours, along highways,
heading north out of Hoboken and New Jersey,
 along the Hudson River into New York State
 past Albany towards Canada.
Are they taking me out of the country?
Am I a victim of human trafficking?

We pass cars, trucks, Greyhound buses,
ambulances, motorcycles,

only stopping once for gas, the woman refuelling,
the man transferring to the back seat
to stop me from escaping.
He has tattooed spiders covering his neck.
More on his hands, his ear lobes.

‘Are you gonna kill me?’ I ask.
I have to know.
And if they do, I want it to be quick.

Torture scenes flash through my mind.
Hellish forebodings of deserted cabins in the woods,
cellars, duct tape, rope, rats.

I should not watch horror movies.

He scratches his chin with dirty fingernails.
‘I’m just a delivery guy.
We’re a transport service, baby.’

‘A what?’

‘We carry human cargo.
Mostly kids who don’t wanna be carried.
It’s just a job.’

‘Carry for who?’
I don’t understand.
Surely this is a mistake.

He unlocks my handcuffs, smiles at the gesture,

impressed by his

own generosity.

'You gotta behave, or I'll put them on again,
and I'll bind your ankles which'll hurt
like sunburn on your ass.'

My wrists are red, skin peeling along the bone
from the pinching of metal.
Evidence of his kindness.

The woman returns,
throws me a Mars Bar, a can of Dr Pepper.
'Nutrition,' she says brightly.
'Plan A is to get you there alive.'

•

What's Plan B? To deliver me dead?

•

The roads narrow, get steeper,
flat highways climb into hills, hills into mountains.
On either side of the road lies dark, dense forest,
occasionally a glimpse of the moon

across water.

The truck slows to avoid potholes,
a dead deer, a dead racoon,
blisters of sticky bird feathers
thickly pasted against the asphalt.

It's legal in New York State to salvage road-kill.
You need a permit from a state trooper to take it home,
fling it into the freezer and use the meat
for summer barbeques.

How do I know this? I know a lot of useless crap.
The internet is endless. Dangerous. Stupid.

'I'm beat,' the man says.
'I need coffee,' the woman says.

'My dad'll pay a ransom,' I tell them.
I think this is true.
Or at least it's true that he'll try to,
if Wendy keeps out of the way.

My father is a real estate lawyer. He has money.

They chuckle.

But nothing has been less funny
than what's going on right now.

•

Unless you count the day Mom died.
That would also be in the Very Unfunny Days category.

Yet there was laughter, an hour after she died,
releasing a helium balloon in the hospice car park,
 watching it sail away with the wind.
Her name on it, ALICE,
a gift from a nurse for her forty-fifth birthday
the week before.

‘I won’t miss your snoring!’ Dad shouted.
‘Or your sourdough,’ Mae added.

I couldn’t get my words out.
I was choked up with grief.
I hugged my older sister.
She smelled of antiseptic.

We’d been in the hospice two weeks.
 Waiting for Mom to go.
 Watching her revive.
 Begging her to stay.
 Whispering goodbye.
 The shallow breaths.
 The spaces between them.

 The strange finality of death.

My mom was messy.
She believed chaos was a sign of life:
cold coffee cups around the house,

a car she rarely vacuumed.
She cursed, never folded laundry.

When she died, the chaos disappeared,
plus her untidy joy.

The world got grim.

Not a funny day.

•

The truck stops.

Doors open.

I am steered from the back seat
into the morning dew
by a different woman:
slender fingers, long neck.
She is wearing a pinstriped trouser suit,
thin-rimmed glasses,
a pencilled-on grin like a cheap lawyer.

‘Connie Ryder? Welcome.
My name is Dr Tracy Montgomery.’
She allows me a second to consider her,
while shrewdly assessing me,
scanning from my eyes

to my
feet.

A deep unease dilates inside me;
I am being examined but also feel
entirely unseen,
like I have been wiped
from the face of the earth.

'Follow me. Quickly,' she snaps.
Her leather loafers rasp against the gravelled ground.
Her stiff brown bob doesn't move as she
strides towards a concrete building,
blocks
dropped carelessly
amongst the pines.

I don't budge.

And I *could* bolt.

Going by the highways we followed
and the density of the trees,
we must be in the beating heart
of the Adirondack Park.
Which bit, I don't know.

But I would be lost to them,
if I got a head start.
And maybe I'd find
a hiker, biker, or horse rider,
someone who could help.

Dr Tracy Montgomery stops,
sighs at my tedious defiance.
'You can resist or comply.
Life is a series of options.
And a series of consequences.'

My kidnappers step out of the truck.
If I flee, they'll follow, and though I am fast,
they're both built like Navy Seals.
'No point running,' I admit out loud.

'Not really,' the man agrees.
He offers me my backpack. 'Good luck.'

I grab my bag and follow Dr Tracy into the building.

I do not know what else to do.
I have never been abducted before.

•

A flailing teenager is dragged along a hallway
by two hulking men.
His feet beat against the floor.
'Get your filthy hands off me!' he hollers.

I step back, so I don't get kicked.

Unfazed, Dr Tracy moves closer to the teenager.

'Do you like Amendments, Jun?' she asks.

I don't know what this means,
but it makes the boy spit at her feet.

Dr Tracy's jaw clenches.

How many kids are they keeping here?
And what do they want with us?
I'm so tired, my thoughts feel fused to my skull;
I am unable to make sense of anything.

Behind a high desk sits a pert receptionist,
spray-tanned with thick, false eyelashes,
lazily winding her hair around one finger
like she's about to check-in hotel guests.

Her pointy, French-manicured nails are
too long to be anything but a nuisance.

'I cut short Jun's phone call,' she says croakily.
Her tone is totally relaxed like this violence is normal.

'Thank you, Mrs Marinella,' Dr Tracy says.
She winks at the heavies clinging to the kid.
'OK. Let him clear his head.'

Like a toddler having a tantrum,
Jun wrestles to free himself.

'I told my dad Belle was missing, that's it.

I asked what he knew.

But I guess questions are a *crime here*?

He speaks slowly, loudly,
as though explaining himself to idiots.

And then, with a glance, he notices me, squints.

'Oh my God,' he mutters.

One of the heavies shakes his head.

'He won't shut up about her.'

It takes Jun some effort to look away from me.

'Yeah . . . and I was telling my dad
what *horseshit* you guys are tryin' to pull,' Jun says.

'Horse. Shit. HORSESHIT.'

His lips are dry, cracked, his eyes busy,
looking at me, then not looking at me,
searching for something in my face.

Dr Tracy frowns. 'I see.'

She studies Jun, his tight jaw and dark eyes.

He stares back at her, intent on not being frightened.

He taps his forehead with his fingertips.

One. Two. Three.

And then again.

One. Two. Three.

I turn to the double doors we came through.

They are automatic. Already closed.

Are they locked too?

Could I slip through them if I wanted to?

'Amendments. Three days,' Dr Tracy says.

'We could all do with some serenity.'

'Where *is* Belle?' Jun asks carefully.

'Why is no one looking for her?'

People don't just disappear.'
He fights to free himself but is roughly held tight.

The old Connie would speak up right about now,
and I hear Mom's voice echo faintly,
telling me to defend him somehow.

But I am too scared.

I stay silent.

A girl has disappeared? From here? How?

Dr Tracy turns to me: 'Jun is wrong, of course.
People *do* vanish.' She snaps her fingers.
'Especially if they wander into the woods alone.

Let that be a lesson.'

•

This place is so horrific I don't want anything
Dr Tracy says to be right.

But I know first-hand that people *do* disappear.

It's not unusual.

Mom was a fire that blazed brightly
and in a moment, she was gone,
the flame extinguished.
Each memory, desire, hope, was taken with her.

All that was left: thin skin over brittle bones.

A husk.

When she died, I was desperate to keep her with me.

I played her favourite songs,

brewed the berry tea she liked –

tried everything I could to hear her, smell her.

But the dead have a habit of disappearing,

first in an instant

and again

over time.

Little by little the world moves on.

Not everyone wants to be reminded.

The past is a painful place.

When Dad and Mae turned towards a new life,

one without Mom,

one with Wendy,

I could feel myself vanishing too,

sliding away from them,

away from everybody, everything.

I don't know what Jun meant

when he asked about this girl, Belle,

but he should know that people go away;

they die, they leave, they turn inward.

There isn't always a mystery to be solved.

BELLE

Belle was wet, tired, confused.
In one night, she had lived many lives,
played so many versions of herself:
the helpful dorm sister; the heartbreaker; the hot mess.
But then it was dusky, suddenly,
and she wanted to retreat,
be with everyone else
because no nearby houses were lit up
to guide her way,
no street-lamps, no cars.
Complete wilderness, dark, heavy.
And it was overcast: Belle couldn't see the moon any more;
the universe was mute.

She did not feel like she was made of stardust
as poetry would have her believe.
That night she was made of regret,
wanting to wish away her mistakes.
Or maybe not.
Maybe she wanted to wish away
all the times her mistakes had been discovered.
She was starting to think bad behaviour wasn't really the
problem,
it was getting caught.

When would the confusion end?

The tick-tocking,
back and forth,
good and bad,
right and wrong?

When would she start walking a straight path,
stop fighting against herself and with everyone around her?
She was bad and was punished,
she was good, and also punished.
It was impossible to win.

Belle mostly worried that he didn't love her any more,
that he would run away without her.
Worse: he would stay and resent her.
No one had ever loved her as he had,
and no one would again, she thought.

She had to get back to the campsite.
If not, and a counsellor found her,
she would sink down several levels,
be months away from graduation.
A proven bad girl.
A legit troubled teen.

But what Belle did not know was that
she would never return to Silver Lake.
Belle Jackson would not be found.

That does not mean no one saw her,
does not mean no one was there.

Someone knows something.

A voice in the darkness,
eyes in the trees.
And more than that.
Everyone knows something.
Many voices in the darkness,
many eyes in the trees.

A whole host of liars and failures.