

THIS TIME SHE MAY NOT BE SO LUCKY

She Left

A NOVEL

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STACIE
GREY



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For Lucy and Calvin
Maybe wait until you're older to read this one.

THE GIRL

Amy slammed the door behind her and stalked out into the night. She should have known. Obviously, she should have known. They would say they were her friends, but they weren't really. Not as long as Jenna was in charge.

She stopped in the shadow of the trees and looked back at the cabin. The problem was, they had all come up here in Chris's car, and right now Chris was leaning against Jenna's knee and laughing at how stupid Amy was. Plus, he'd had at least three beers, so even if there was a universe where Amy could go back in and ask him to drive her home, there would be too much risk of being caught in one of the holiday checkpoints that were all around town to catch drunk teenagers just like them. Amy should know—her dad was manning one of them right now.

So she couldn't drive. And she couldn't go back. And the cheap brick phone that was the only kind her parents would buy her didn't get any signal out here, so even if they weren't both working and she did

have someone to call, she couldn't. Which meant that Amy only had one choice. She turned around and started walking.



It probably would have made sense to take the road. There were no streetlights this far from town, but the moon was almost full, and out in the open there was plenty of light to see by. Plus, if anyone wanted to find her, that was where they would look.

But the road went all the way around the park, probably four miles. And anyway, Amy didn't want them to come find her. That would be pathetic, making herself walk all that extra distance, just because she was hoping they would be sorry. They weren't sorry; they were having a better time without her. She would go through the park, just to show them how much she didn't care.

It was darker than she had expected under the trees. Amy went slow at first, keeping her eyes on the path and listening carefully for the sound of anyone coming after her. A couple of times she thought she heard something—a footstep, or some branches breaking, but no one called her name.

Eventually, Amy's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she was able to pull some of her attention back from the ground in front of her to the bigger picture of what she had done. There were only two weeks left in the school year, but that was enough. She could just hear them all laughing about how Amy Brewer got so mad about a dumb joke that she walked for miles on Memorial Day night, literally running home to her mommy. She could try to tell her side of the story, but who would care? She had been one of them; she got what she deserved. Amy thought

about the I-told-you-so looks she would get from her former friends and almost cried. She couldn't imagine anything worse happening to anybody.

Any other time, when things were bad, Amy at least had sports to fall back on. People forgave a lot when you were scoring goals and winning races. But the soccer season wouldn't start until November, and she'd had her final track meet last week. As she walked, she wondered if it would still be possible to sign up for a summer team, maybe swimming? It was worth a try.

Her route took her through an open-space park, one of a dozen or so that ringed the suburbs east of San Francisco where Amy had lived her whole life. She had thought of it as a familiar place, ordinary and kind of boring, but it didn't feel that way now. It wasn't even the first time she had been out here at night, but this was no nature hike with the hippie lady from the ranger station. This part of the path hadn't been maintained, and trees leaned low over it, while bushes reached out to scrape her legs below her shorts. (Probably poison oak, Amy thought. Why wouldn't it be?)

That was bad enough, but the worst part was that every time she moved, she thought she heard another footstep from somewhere behind her or to her right. She would stop, and the noise stopped, too, and no matter how quickly she turned to look back she couldn't see where it was coming from.

It's just the echo of my own steps, she told herself, but she wasn't convinced. Since when did bushes echo?

Then there was another sound, a very definite crunch, and Amy jumped. Did mountain lions hunt at night? She thought they might. Right

now, night seemed like a time for hunting. She wanted to run, but she fought the impulse. Amy was pretty sure animals would chase you if you ran. They had to, it was just instinct. So she kept her pace steady and made herself look as tall as possible, stomping with every step to sound big and heavy.

Eventually, she came out from among the oak and bay trees into a eucalyptus grove. Here, the undergrowth vanished—she remembered the ranger telling them it was because the trees poisoned the ground below them. The ranger had also said the creaking noises were from the wind rubbing the branches together, but Amy had liked to make up stories about how they were doors opening in the woods. Now she wished she hadn't. She wasn't a kid anymore, and she didn't like to think about anything coming through a door right now, even an imaginary one.

The more she walked, the colder Amy got. She hadn't brought a jacket, and even though it was almost summer, the dry air didn't hold enough of the daytime heat for her shorts and belly shirt to be comfortable. There was an emergency blanket in her backpack, left over from her mom's Y2K supplies, but she didn't have to think very long to decide that even the small chance of someone seeing her hiking through the park wrapped in crinkly Mylar wasn't worth the risk.

Aside from the creaking trees, the park was quiet, but further away Amy could hear the pops and bangs of illegal fireworks going off all over town. That was why the mayor's office had decided to put on the official fireworks show, according to Amy's mom, who had to set it up. It was supposed to give people something better to see so they wouldn't go around scaring their neighbors' dogs and risking starting fires in the dry grass. From the way things were sounding, Amy didn't think it had worked.

Another blast went off, close enough that the ground shook. Amy stopped and looked around to see if she could spot where it had come from, but there was nothing in the sky, just the shrieking sound of whistlers in the distance.

In a weird way, hearing the fireworks made her feel better. It was a reminder that even though it seemed like she was in the wilderness, she wasn't really that far from people, and home, and all the parts of her regular life. She walked on through the cough drop-scented air of the eucalyptus grove and tried to imagine what that life was going to look like now.



“I get everything.” Jenna had said it while she was looking straight at Chris, who was peeling the label off a beer bottle with his long fingers. He had just glanced over at Amy as when Jenna made her declaration and Amy almost hadn't heard her over his smile. But, of course, Jenna had gotten herself right back into the center of everyone's attention. She didn't explain what she meant by the comment; she didn't need to. Jenna was pretty and thin and her dad was rich enough to buy her anything she asked for, and most things she didn't. She got everything, and she always would. Amy couldn't even remember what had brought it up; it was just the sort of thing Jenna said. And now, Amy thought, one of the things Jenna was going to get was the ability to ruin her senior year. It wasn't fair, but then nothing was.

Or maybe not. Amy slipped her hand in her pocket and wrapped her fingers around the small plastic bottle there, feeling its contents rattle as she walked through the trees. Maybe, just this once, Jenna was going to find out that she wasn't as untouchable as she thought she was.

Down out of the hills, the ground started to level off. The trail was more developed here, with signs reminding hikers to leash their dogs and cyclists to yield to horses, and the brush on either side was cut further back, so she didn't have to move branches out of the way or watch for leaves that would brush her ankles.

Still, Amy felt an uneasiness she couldn't quite shake. She had just about managed to convince herself that the rustling noises that seemed to follow her were nothing but the wind, and if anything had been stalking her there was no reason for it to have waited this long, but there was still a prickling on the back of her neck that wouldn't go away.

As she made her way to the road, she was tempted to see if her phone had any signal yet. This probably wasn't the kind of emergency her parents had in mind when they bought it for her, even after seeing what it cost, but one of them would find a way to get out of work to get her, and then this whole stupid night would finally be over. But she didn't, partly because she wasn't ready to explain what happened yet, and partly because, in the only piece of good luck she had had all day, she had just gotten to the place where the park drive joined the main road when a late-night bus turned the corner and stopped. Gratefully, Amy climbed on, paid her fare, and sank into the hard plastic seat as two police cars flew by, blaring their sirens.

She was thinking about what she was going to say the first time someone asked her at school about what happened when her phone started chiming from the bottom of her backpack. Amy's first instinct was to lunge for it, and her fingers had wrapped around the plastic brick before she paused to think. The only people who were going to call her right now were the five she left back at that cabin. Maybe they wanted

to play with her some more, or maybe they were worried she was going to tell someone and get them in trouble. Either way, Amy wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of answering.

She pulled her hand out of the backpack and folded it over in her lap to muffle the sound.



It wasn't far from the bus stop to Amy's house, which was one of the many ways it was different from where Jenna lived. The ranch-style stucco houses of the midcentury subdivision were all anyone needed to see to know this wasn't a rich neighborhood, but for once that didn't bother Amy. All she wanted was to get inside and forget this night had ever happened.

She was standing in the kitchen, holding a box of graham crackers, when someone started banging on the door. Still carrying the box, Amy walked slowly down the hall, unsure if she should even answer it. There was no peephole in the door, but there was a window in the hall bathroom next to it. Amy looked out, but all she could see was a hooded figure, banging on the door with one hand and holding something to their mouth with the other.

Then they stopped and started looking around on the front step. It didn't take long for the figure to find the key in the hollow rock (Amy's dad hated that thing) and before Amy even had time to run or lock herself into the bathroom, the door opened and the figure swooped through and grabbed her.

"Oh, thank Heaven, thank Heaven!"

It was her neighbor, old Mrs. Andrews, dressed in one of her

husband's oversized sweatshirts and clutching her cordless phone as she hugged Amy tightly to her generous bosom.

"It's okay, she's here. She's right here in the house," she shouted into the receiver. "Oh, honey, you had us all so worried!"

Confused, Amy pried herself out of the hug.

"Worried? Why were you worried? Did they tell you I did something?" That was a possibility she hadn't even considered, that the others would take it even further by trying to get her in trouble. This was worse than she had thought.

"Oh no, no no. You don't know? Oh, honey, they're all dead."

1

Twenty Years Later

Exit at Douglas Pine Road in five hundred feet.”

Special Agent Amy Therese Brewer put on her blinker and moved into the right lane to slow down, letting the rest of the cars roar past up into the Sierras. She didn't care much for the tone of the lady in her phone, but she didn't like to take her eyes off the road, and with no one else there to tell her where to turn, it was the best she had. In fact, despite the dramatic scenery of the mountains, the trip had been less than pleasant. For most of the way the holiday traffic had kept her at a crawl, and the only station her rental car's radio seemed to get was a local news channel that spent the whole drive in a typically Californian panic about a potential late-season storm.

The next round of directions sent her down a series of local roads, at first wide and well-maintained, then growing narrower

and rougher until she ended up on what was essentially a long driveway clinging to the side of a cliff, complete with sections that had washed out, leaving gaps in the asphalt that yawned over the mountainside. She slowed down, turned on her headlights, and hoped she wasn't going to meet anyone coming the other way.

Fortunately, she didn't. In fact, if it hadn't been for the electronic voice insisting that her destination remained just ahead, Therese might have thought no one had been down this road for years. (The cell phone signal was strong, at least, which gave her reason to hope she hadn't entirely left the civilized world.) So she drove on, distrustful but short on other options, resolving to get an actual paper map in the unlikely event she ever did something like this again.

In truth, she could hardly believe she was doing it now. Therese had spent the last two decades doing everything she could to distance herself from what had happened that night twenty years ago, starting with giving up her first name. Even at the agency there were only a handful of people who had any idea about her connection to one of their most famous unsolved cases. That might be about to change, after this weekend, but in a lot of ways that decision had been taken out of her hands.

The distance to her destination kept getting smaller, and there were still no buildings in sight. Therese was cursing her faith in technology when she rounded a tight bend in the road and the house rose up in front of her.

Therese supposed "house" was the right word; she couldn't think of a better one. But it seemed insufficient for the building she

had arrived at, a huge, wood-shingled structure sprawling across a ledge that looked to be carved in the mountain. It reminded her of the kind of national park lodges they built in the 1900s, when no one visited the wilderness without a butler.

The sun was beginning to go down, and around to the western side of the house, she could catch a glimpse of portrait windows shining gold in the setting light. Next to them there was the corner of a deck, which must look out over a spectacular view of the foothills and the valley beyond. The only flaw in the view was a swath of burned forest curving across the mountainside above the house: a stark reminder of the threats that the California wilderness had for even the most luxurious dwelling.

“TV money,” she muttered to herself. “Got to be.”

The invitation hadn't mentioned any television connection, but it had been vague enough on the specifics that Therese had come prepared for anything. The name and email address had belonged to a respected journalist, for what it was worth. After all, even respected journalists had to eat. But even if the piece Ms. Scott was putting together for the twentieth anniversary of what had come to be known as the Memorial Day Massacre was going to turn out to be pure exploitation, at least this time no one could accuse Therese of running away.

She parked her car next to a similar rental and took a quick survey of the other vehicles in the driveway. Three more had clearly come straight from the airport; the other five she judged as personal cars. One oversized truck that had never seen so much as a box of nails in its bed, one minivan that had been through the

wars, two small SUVs—one with a lot of corgi-related bumper stickers—one high-end Tesla, and one absolute beater of a hatchback. It was an interesting assortment, this first glimpse of the people she was about to meet.

But Therese hadn't come here to spend the weekend with their cars. She walked up to the huge oak door and turned the handle.



There were plenty of things to be impressed by in the entry hall. The towering ceiling, the beams made from whole tree trunks, the striking geometric rug that stretched the length of the polished hardwood floor. But Therese wasn't looking at any of those details, because all her attention was taken up by what was on the walls.

Along the length of the hall were photos, blown up to ten times their original size, printed on cardboard stock, and hung from picture hooks. Smiling young faces, twice as large as life, crowded the space, a full-color window into the past.

Therese had seen the photos before, several times in the last twenty years, but not for a while now. They had been taken by Oliver that night, with his new digital camera that he was showing off, printed by the police to use in the investigation, and leaked to the press for what was bound to have been a pathetic amount of money. From there, the photos had appeared in every news story, magazine article, and breathless unsolved-mystery program that had featured the case, with special attention on the ones that featured Jenna, young and lithe and blond, and always smiling for the camera.

They were all from before it happened, of course. Oliver had likely died in the explosion, and when the camera was recovered it was too damaged to have had any chance of recording what had come after.

Therese moved slowly down the line of photos, the weight of the duffel bag on her shoulder forgotten as she took in the details she hadn't noticed before. There was Chloe, trying to balance a paper plate full of Skittles on her fingertip—one of Josh's more innocuous dares. And in the next picture, Josh, posing with his fingers as sideways Vs, wearing the knit cap and hoodie that he thought made him look like Eminem in *8 Mile*, but on him it just looked sweaty.

And Jenna, of course. Her photos had the positions on either side of the stairs, angled slightly toward the door so they couldn't be missed. Just the way she would have liked it. In the photo on the right, she was standing in front of one of the cabin's windows, holding up a carved wooden candlestick. The place had been decorated in a kind of rural-medieval-vaguely-European style. Jenna had been making fun of the decor, picking up items and coming up with outrageous backstories for them, like the candlestick had belonged to Anne Boleyn, and the hideous "tribal" shield on the wall behind her had been the original inspiration for Tarzan. (More likely from an interior decorator from Tarzana, Oliver had said.)

In the photo on the left, Jenna was leaning against the kitchen counter, apparently unaware of the camera while somehow managing to give it every one of her best angles. Somehow, that was

the picture that had made its way into most of the media coverage—it had even briefly featured on the cover of a self-published book about the deaths before Oliver’s family had challenged the rights. Chris appeared on the edge of the photo, almost as an afterthought (indeed, many of the publications had cropped him out entirely), looking at her like a golden retriever who had been given an entire steak, and wasn’t sure he was allowed to have it.

There was only one picture that had been taken after Therese had left the party, with Chris caught midspeech, looking like he was talking about something serious. Therese had spent a lot of time looking at that picture and wondering what he had been saying.

Not that there was any way for her to ever know. Based on the time stamps, that photo had been taken about three minutes before an improvised bomb made from a pressure cooker had gone off in the crawl space under the cabin, and approximately fifteen minutes before someone had come through with a knife and stabbed the survivors of the explosion to death.