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Opening Extract from...

Little Girl Gone

Written by Alexandra Burt

Published by AVON

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1

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At its core this book is about mothers and therefore it is only fair that I thank my mother who shared her beloved books and short life with me; and to my daughter, who is my biggest inspiration.

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For all mothers, especially mine.
For all daughters, especially mine.



part one

'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir, because
I'm not myself, you see.'

Lewis Carroll,
Alice in Wonderland

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.