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The Missing

Written by C. L. Taylor

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To my late grandmothers Milbrough Griffiths and Olivia Bella Taylor.

Thursday 5th February 2015

Jackdaw44: *Do you want to play a game?*
ICE9: *No.*
Jackdaw44: *Not sex.*
ICE9: *What then?*
Jackdaw44: *Questions. I'm bored. It's just a bit of fun.*
ICE9: . . .
Jackdaw44: *I take it that's a yes. OK. First question. Would you rather go deaf or blind?*
ICE9: *You really are bored, aren't you? Deaf.*
Jackdaw44: *Would you rather drown in a river or burn in a fire?*
ICE9: *Neither.*
Jackdaw44: *You have to choose.*
ICE9: *Drown in a river.*
Jackdaw44: *Be buried or cremated?*
ICE9: *I don't like this game.*
Jackdaw44: *It doesn't mean anything. I'm just trying to get to know you better.*

ICE9: *Weird way of doing it.*
Jackdaw44: *I love you. I want to know everything about you.*
ICE9: *Buried.*
Jackdaw44: *Be infamous or be forgotten?*
ICE9: *Forgotten.*
Jackdaw44: *Seriously???*
ICE9: *Yes.*
Jackdaw44: *I'd choose infamy every time.*
ICE9: *No surprise there.*
Jackdaw44: *Cry at my funeral or save your tears for private?*
ICE9: *WHAT?!! Stop being so morbid.*
Jackdaw44: *I'm not. I'm just preparing you.*
ICE9: *For what?*
ICE9: *Hello?*
ICE9: *HELLO?*

Chapter 1

Wednesday 5th August 2015

What do you wear when you peer into the barrel of a camera and plead for someone, anyone, to please, please tell you where your child is? A blouse? A jumper? Armour?

Today is the day of the second television appeal. It's been six months since my son disappeared. Six months? How can it be that long? The counsellor I started seeing four weeks after he was taken from us told me the pain would lessen, that I would never feel his loss as keenly as I did that first day.

She lied.

It takes me the best part of an hour before I can look at myself in the bedroom mirror without crying. My hair, cut in a short elfin style last week, doesn't suit my wide, angular face and my eyes look dark and deep-set beneath the new fringe. The blouse I'd deemed sensible and presentable last night suddenly looks thin and cheap, the knee-length pencil skirt too

tight on my hips. I select a pair of navy trousers and a soft grey jumper instead. Smart, but not too smart, serious but not sombre.

Mark is not in the bedroom with me. He got up at 5.37 a.m. and slipped silently out of the room without acknowledging my soft grunt as I peered at the time on the alarm clock. When we went to bed last night we lay in silence side by side, not touching, too tense to talk. It took a long time for sleep to come.

I didn't say anything when Mark got up. He's always been an early riser and enjoys a solitary hour or so, pottering around the house, before everyone else wakes up.

Our house was always so noisy in the morning, with Billy and Jake fighting over who got to use the bathroom first and then turning up their stereos full volume when they returned to their rooms to get changed. I'd pound on their bedroom doors and shout at them to turn the music down. Mark's never been very good with noise. He spends hours each week driving from city to city as part of his job as a pharmaceutical sales rep but always in silence – no music, audiobooks or radio for him.

'Mark?' It's 7.30 a.m. when I pad into the kitchen, taking care to step over the cracked tile by the fridge so I don't snag my pop socks. Three years ago Billy opened the fridge and a bottle of wine fell out, cracking the tiles that Mark had only finished laying the day before. I told him it was my fault.

'Mark?'

The kettle is still warm but there's no sign of my husband. I poke my head around the living-room door but he's not there either. I return to the kitchen, and open the back door that leads to the driveway at the side of the house. The garage door is open. The *rrr-rrr-rrr* splutter of the lawnmower being started drifts towards me.

'Mark?' I slip my feet into a pair of Jake's size ten trainers that have been abandoned next to the mat and slip-slide across the driveway towards the garage. It's August and the sun is already high in the sky, the park on the other side of the street is a riot of colour and our lawn is damp with dew. 'You're not planning on cutting the grass now, surel—'

I stop short at the garage door. My tall, fair-haired husband is bent over the lawnmower in his best navy suit, a greasy black oil stain just above the knee of his left trouser leg.

'Mark! What the hell are you doing?'

He doesn't look up.

'Servicing the lawnmower.' He gives the starting cord another yank and the machine growls in protest.

'Now?'

'I haven't used it for a month. It'll rust up if it's not serviced.'

I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

'But Mark, it's Billy's appeal.'

'I know what day it is.' This time he does look up. His cheeks are flushed and there's a sheen of sweat that stretches from his thick, unkempt eyebrows all the way up to his receding hairline. He passes a hand

over his brow, then wipes it on his trouser leg, rubbing sweat into the greasy oil stain. I want to scream at him that he's ruined his best suit and he can't go to Billy's appeal like that, but today isn't the day for an argument, so I take a deep breath instead.

'It's seven-thirty,' I say. 'We need to get going in half an hour. DS Forbes said he'd meet us at eight-thirty to go through a few things.'

Mark rubs a clenched fist against his lower back as he straightens up. 'Is Jake ready?'

'I don't think so. His door was shut as I came downstairs and I couldn't hear voices.'

Jake shares his bedroom with his girlfriend Kira. They started dating at school when they were sixteen and they've been together three years now, sharing a room in our house for the last eighteen months. Jake begged me to let her stay. Her mum's drinking had got worse and she'd started lashing out at Kira, physically and verbally. He told me that if I didn't let her live with us she'd have to move up to Edinburgh to live with her grandfather and they'd never get to see each other.

'Well, if Jake can't be bothered to get up, then let's go without him,' Mark says. 'I haven't got the energy to deal with him. Not today.'

It was Billy who used to disappoint Mark. Billy with his 'I don't give a shit' attitude about school and his belief that life owed him fame and fortune. Jake was always Mark's golden boy in comparison. He worked hard at school, gained six A- to C-grade GCSEs and passed his electrician course at college

with flying colours. These days it's phone calls about Jake's poor attendance at work that we're dealing with, not Billy's.

I haven't got the energy to deal with Jake either but I can't just shrug my shoulders like Mark. We need to present a united front to the media. We all need to be there, sitting side by side behind the desk. A strong family, in appearance if nothing else.

'I'm going back to the house. I'll get your other suit out of the wardrobe,' I say but Mark has already turned his attention to the lawnmower.

I shuffle back to the path, Jake's oversized shoes leaving a trail in the gravel, and reach for the handle of the back door.

I hear the scream the second I push it open.

Chapter 2

'Jake, give me that!' Kira's screech carries down the stairs and there's a loud thump from the bedroom above as something, or someone, hits the floor.

I kick off Jake's shoes and take the stairs two at a time, cross the landing and fly into his bedroom without stopping to knock. There's a flurry of activity as Kira and Jake jump away from each other. Barely five foot tall with blonde hair that falls past her shoulders, Kira looks tiny and doll-like in her pink knickers and a tight white T-shirt. Jake is bare-chested, naked apart from a pair of black jockey shorts that cling to his hips. His shoulders and chest are so broad and muscled he seems to fill the room. At his feet is a shattered bottle leaking pale brown liquid onto the beige carpet. There are shards of glass on the pile of weights plates beside it.

'Mum!' Jake leaps away from Kira, planting his right foot on the broken bottle. He howls in anguish

as a shard of clear glass embeds itself in his sole.

'Don't!' I shout, but he's already yanked it out. Bright red blood gushes out, covering his fingers and dripping onto the carpet.

'Don't move!' I sprint to the bathroom and grab the first towel I see. When I return to the bedroom Jake is sitting on the bed, one hand gripping his ankle, the other pressed over the wound. Blood seeps between his fingers. Kira, still standing in the centre of the room, is ashen. I pick my way carefully through the broken glass on the floor, then crouch on the carpet in front of Jake. It stinks of alcohol.

'Let go.'

He winces as he peels his fingers away from his foot. The wound isn't more than half a centimetre across but it's deep and blood is still gushing out. I wrap the towel as tightly around it as I can in an attempt to stem the flow.

'Hold it here.' I gesture for Jake to press his hands over the towel. 'I need to get a safety pin.'

Seconds later I'm back in the bedroom and attempting to secure the makeshift bandage around my son's foot. There are dark circles under his eyes and the skin is pulled too tight over his cheekbones. Mark and I weren't the only ones who didn't sleep last night.

'What happened, Jake?' I ask carefully.

He looks past me to Kira who is pulling on some clothes. Her lips part and, for a second, I think she's about to speak but then she lowers her eyes and wriggles into her jeans. Downstairs the back door opens

with a thud as Mark makes his way back into the house, then there's a *click-click* sound as he paces backwards and forwards on the kitchen tiles. In a minute he'll be up the stairs, asking what the hold-up is.

I sniff at Jake. His breath smells pungent. 'Were you drinking that rum before I came in?'

'Mum!'

'Well? Were you?'

'I had a few last night, that's all.'

'And then some.' I pluck a large piece of glass from the carpet. Most of the label is still affixed. 'What the hell were you thinking?'

'I'm stressed, okay?'

'I haven't got enough for a taxi,' Kira says plaintively, reaching into her jeans pocket and proffering a palm of small change.

'Claire?' Mark's voice booms up the stairs. 'It's eight o'clock. We have to go. Now!'

'I need to leave,' Kira says. 'There's a college trip to London today – we're going to the National Portrait Gallery – and I'm supposed to be at the train station for half eight.'

'Okay, okay.' I gesture for her to stop panicking. 'Give me a sec.'

'Mark?' I step out onto the landing and shout down the stairs. 'Have you got any cash on you?'

'About three quid,' he shouts back. 'Why?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Right.' I step back into Jake's bedroom. 'Kira, I'll give you a lift to the train station. And as for you, Jake . . .' There's no blood on the towel I've pinned

around his foot but he'll still need the wound to be cleaned and a tetanus jab. If there was time I'd drop Kira at the station and then take Jake to the doctor's but it would mean doubling back on myself and I can't be late for the appeal. Why did this have to happen today of all days?

'Okay.' I make a snap decision. 'Jake, stay here and sober up and I'll drive you to the GP's when I get back. If you need anything, Liz is next door. She's not working until later.'

'No, I'm coming with you. I need to go to the press conference.' Jake grimaces as he pushes himself up and off the bed and hops onto his good foot so we're face to face. Unlike Billy who shot up when he hit twelve, Jake's height has never crept above five foot nine. The boys couldn't have an argument without Billy slipping in some sly jab about his older brother's stature. Jake would retaliate and then World War III would break out.

'Claire!' Mark shouts again, louder this time. He'll fly off the handle if he sees the state Jake is in. 'Claire! DS Forbes is here. We need to go!'

'You're not going anywhere,' I hiss at Jake as Kira pulls an apologetic face and squeezes past me. She presses herself up against the linen cupboard on the landing, pulls on her coat and then roots around in the pockets.

'Billy was my brother,' Jake says. His face crumples and for a split second he looks like a child again, but then a tendon in his neck pulses and he raises his chin. 'You can't stop me from going.'

‘You’ve been drinking,’ I say as levelly as I can. ‘If you want to help Billy, then the best thing you can do right now is stay at home and sleep it off. We’ll talk when I get back.’

‘Claire!’ Mark shouts from the top of the stairs.

‘Mum . . .’ Jake reaches a hand towards me but I’m already halfway out the door. I yank it shut behind me, just as Mark draws level.

‘Is Jake ready?’

‘He’s not well.’ I press my palms against the door.

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘Stomach upset,’ Kira says, her soft voice cutting through the awkward pause. ‘He was up all night with it. It must have been the vindaloo.’

I shoot her a grateful look. Poor girl, getting caught up in our family drama when the very reason she moved in with us was to escape from her own.

Mark glances at the closed door behind me, then his eyes meet mine. ‘Are we off then?’

‘I need to drop Kira at the train station for her college trip. You go on ahead with DS Forbes and I’ll meet you there.’

‘How’s that going to look? The two of us turning up separately?’ Mark looks at Kira. ‘Why didn’t you mention this trip last—’ He sighs. ‘Never mind. Forget it. I’ll see you there, Claire.’

He hasn’t changed his trousers. The greasy oil stain is still visible, a dark mark on his left thigh, but I haven’t got the heart to mention it.

Chapter 3

Neither of us say a word as we pile into the car and I start the engine. The silence continues past the Broadwalk shopping centre and down the Wells Road. Only when I stop the car at the traffic lights by the Three Lamps junction and Kira pulls her iPod out of her jacket pocket do I speak.

'What was that all about?'

'Sorry?' She looks at me in alarm, as though she's forgotten I'm sitting next to her.

'You and Jake, earlier.'

'It was just . . .' She stares at the red stop light as though willing it to change to green. Without her thick black eyeliner and generous dusting of bronzing powder her heart-shaped face looks pale and the sprinkle of freckles across her nose makes her look younger than she is. 'Just . . . a thing . . . just an argument.'

'It looked serious.'