Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Good as Gone

Written by Amy Gentry

Published by HQ

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

GOOD AS GONE

Amy Gentry



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

HQ
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

This paperback edition 2017

1
First published in Great Britain by
HQ, an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd. 2017

Copyright © Amy Gentry 2017

Amy Gentry asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-00-820317-7

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this publication maybe reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Our policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the legal environmental regulations of the country of origin.

For Curtis, the best living human.

Prologue

Jane woke up and whispered, "Julie?"

The room yawned around her. After two years of sleeping alone in her own bedroom in the new house, Jane no longer dreamed of the ceiling fan dropping onto the bed and chopping her up. The spiders, too, had vanished from the shadows; ten-year-olds don't need to have the corners checked before bedtime. Only occasionally, when something woke her in the middle of the night, the silence around her ached for Julie's soft breathing. In the old house, she used to hoist one foot over the top bunk railing and giggle until Julie said, *Shhh, Janie, go back to sleep.* Now, she shut her eyes tightly before they could drift toward the dark seams where the walls and ceiling met.

The next noise definitely came from Julie's room.

Jane pulled back the covers and slid her bare feet down to the carpet. In the old house, a braided rug slipped over the smooth wooden floor when she got out of bed. Now her feet barely made

a sound on thick carpet as she padded to the door and peered down the dark hallway. A faint rectangle of lighter darkness hovered at the end—a closed door.

They rarely slept with doors closed; Janie's room got too hot, Julie's too cold. Mom grumbled about the air circulation in two-story houses, but Mom and Dad's room downstairs on the first floor was always shut at night, because they were adults. Now Julie was too, or wanted to be. Ever since her thirteenth birthday, she seemed to be practicing for adulthood all the time, brushing her hair slowly in front of the bathroom mirror as if rehearsing for some secret play, sitting at her desk to write in her diary instead of flopping on the bed stomach-first, like Jane. And closing her bedroom door.

At the end of the hall, the pale rectangle shuddered, a crack of darkness opening up around one side. Julie's bedroom door receded inward, four large fingers hooked around its edge.

Before she had time to think, Jane ducked into her closet, crouched down, and pulled the door shut behind her. The fingers—they were too high up on the door to belong to Julie, too large to belong to her mother. They didn't belong to her father either, but she didn't know how she knew they didn't, and that was the most unsettling thing of all.

A tiny, sickening click reminded her that the closet door never stayed closed for long. She threw her hands forward, but the door was already floating slowly open.

Jane squeezed her eyes shut as a soft tread started down the hallway.

When she opened them a moment later, the closet door had come to rest three inches from the door frame. The slice of hallway visible from her hiding place almost glowed against the clos-

et's deeper darkness; she could see every fiber in the beige carpet, every ripple in the wall paint, and, hanging on the wall, half of a framed studio portrait in which long-ago Jane sat on long-ago Julie's lap, wearing a baby dress with a sailboat on it. The sailboat shook on its embroidered waves. Everything else was shaking too. The steps continued toward Jane's room.

The noisy floorboard in the middle of the hall moaned. The owner of the hand was now halfway to her room. Could he hear the creak in her ears each time her thundering heart shook the little boat? Jane resisted the urge to shrink back into her clothes on their rattling hangers.

Just then, a skinny foot appeared against the carpet, a patch of pink polish clinging to the big toenail, and Jane let out her breath. It was only Julie. She'd crouched over her toes perfecting the pink for an hour before her birthday party, but by the middle of the summer, most of it had scraped off on the rough white bottom of the backyard pool, leaving only these little triangles around the edges. So Jane had been wrong about the fingers, seeing things again, like the spiders in the shadows. Sure enough, here came Julie, moving into the frame with her ordinary Mickey Mouse nightshirt flapping around her ordinary knees, heading toward the staircase by Jane's room, probably just going down for a midnight snack. Jane's matching Donald Duck nightshirt was in a brown bag waiting to be taken to Goodwill; she'd already outgrown it. Her mom said she'd be taller than Julie someday. Jane hugged her pajama'd knees in relief.

But the fingers were back, this time perched on Julie's shoulder, clutching at the fabric of her nightshirt, her long blond hair trapped between their knobby knuckles. Jane barely had time to notice Julie's stiff, straight posture, like that of a wide-eyed pup-

pet, before she saw the tall man following close behind her. Julie and the strange man moved together in slow motion, as if his long arm and hairy hand were a chain binding them together.

Wake up, wake up, wake up, Jane told herself, but nothing happened. Everything was frozen, including her, like in a dream; only Julie and the man kept moving. Slow, but faster than frozen; slow, but they were almost to her room. Janie opened her mouth to scream.

Then Julie saw her.

Jane's scream slid back down into her stomach as Julie stared straight into her closet hiding place. Jane stared back, begging Julie to tell her what to do next, readying herself to obey, to yell or cry or maybe even laugh if it was all a joke. Surely Julie wouldn't leave her alone in this bad dream. If Julie would just tell her what to do, Jane promised silently, she would listen to her and never complain from now on.

Without moving her head, Julie lifted her eyebrows and glanced meaningfully toward the man behind her, then back to Jane, as if telling her to take a good look, but Jane didn't want to; she kept her eyes trained on Julie instead. Girl and man turned on the landing without pausing at her door, and Jane saw why Julie was walking so stiffly: the man held the tip of a long, sharp knife to her back. Jane felt a nasty sting like a bug bite between her own shoulder blades, and her eyes filled up with tears.

They were poised at the top of the stairs when a loud tick sounded from the attic. Jane knew it was only the house settling, but the man stopped and looked over his shoulder nervously. In the split second before he looked back, Julie, as if freed from a spell, turned her head to Jane, raised her left index finger to her lips, and formed them into a silent *O*.

Shhh.

Jane obeyed. Julie started down the stairs, followed by the man with the knife.

And that, according to the only witness, is the story of how I lost my daughter—both my daughters, everything, everything—in a single night.

1

Julie's been gone for eight years, but she's been dead much longer—centuries—when I step outside into the steaming air on my way to teach my last class of the spring semester. The middle of May is as hot as human breath in Houston. Before I've even locked the door behind me, a damp friction starts up between my skin and clothes; five more paces to the garage, and every hidden place slickens. By the time I get to the car, the crooks of my knuckles are sweating up the plastic sides of the insulated travel cup, and my grip slips as I climb into the SUV, throwing oily beads of black coffee onto the lid. A few on my hand, too, but I let them burn and turn on the air conditioning.

Summer comes a little earlier every year.

I back the car out past the driveway security gate we installed after it was too late, thread through the neighborhood to the feeder road, and then merge onto I-10, where concrete climbs the sky in massive on-ramps like the ribbed tails of dinosaurs. By 8:00

a.m., the clogged-artery-and-triple-bypassed heart of rush hour, I am pushing my way into fourteen lanes of gridlock, a landscape of flashing hoods and red taillights winking feebly in the dingy morning.

I need to see over the cars, so the gas-saving Prius sits in the garage while I drive Tom's hulking black Range Rover—it's not as if he's using it—down three different freeways to the university and back every day. Crawling along at a snail's pace, I can forget about the other commuters and focus on the chipped letters mounted on the concrete awnings of strip malls: BIG BOY DOLLAR STORE, CARTRIDGE WORLD, L-A HAIR. The neon-pink grin of a Mexican restaurant, the yellow-and-blue behemoth of an IKEA rearing up behind the toll road, the jaundiced brick of apartment complexes barely shielded from the freeway by straggling rows of crape myrtles—everything reminds me that the worst has already happened. I need them like my mother needed her rosary. *Hail, Mister Carwash, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Pray for us, O Qwik-Fast Printing. Our Lady of Self-Storage, to thee do we send up our sighs.*

Even Julie's billboards are gone. There used to be one right here, at the intersection of I-10 and Loop 610, by the senior-living tower wedged between First Baptist and a concrete flyover, but the trustees decided the billboards should come down five years ago. Or has it been longer? I believe it was due to the expense, though I never had any idea how much they were costing—the Julie Fund was Tom's territory. These days, the giant, tooth-whitened smile of a megachurch pastor beams down from the billboard next to the words FAITH EVERY DAY, NOT EVERYDAY FAITH. I wonder if they papered him right over her face or if they tore her off in strips first. Ridiculous thought; the billboard's

advertised a lot of things since then. Dentists, vasectomy reversals.

A line of Wordsworth from today's lesson plan rattles through my head like a bad joke: *Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

I flip my blinker and merge onto the loop. Despite all the time I've spent reading and studying Wordsworth's poetry—despite the fact that I am going to teach it in a few hours to a class full of impressionable young students and plan to continue teaching it as long as my university allows me to cling to my position without publication, committee work, or any effort besides the not-insubstantial difficulty I have getting out of bed every morning to face a world where the worst thing has already happened and somehow I'm still alive—I don't believe in the glory and the dream. I believe in statistics.

The statistics say that most abducted children are taken by people they know; Julie was taken by a stranger. The statistics say that most child abductors attempt to lure their victims into a vehicle; Julie was taken from her own bedroom at knifepoint in the middle of the night while my other daughter, Jane, watched from a closet. And finally, the statistics say that three-quarters of abducted children who are murdered are dead within the first three hours of being taken. Three hours is just about how long we think Jane sat in her closet, rigid with fear, before rousing Tom and me with panicked crying.

By the time we knew Julie was gone, her fate was sealed.

The inevitability of it has spread like an infection or the smell of gasoline. To make myself know that Julie is dead, I tell myself she always was—before she was born, before I was born. Before Wordsworth was born. Passing the pines of Memorial Park,

I picture her staring upward with sightless eyes under a blanket of reddish-gold needles. Driving by Crestview Apartments, I see her buried in the azalea bed. The strip mall with the SunRay Nail Salon and Spa yields visions of the dumpster behind the SunRay Nail Salon and Spa. That's my visionary gleam.

I used to want the world for Julie. Now I just want something to bury.

My class—the last before summer break—passes in a blur. I could teach Wordsworth in my sleep, and although I'm not sleeping now, I am dreaming. I see the crystal blue of the pool, shining like a plastic gem, surrounded by a freshly sanded deck under the tall, spindly pines. The girls were so excited about the pool, and I remember asking Tom, the accountant, whether we could afford it. The Energy Corridor District, with its surplus of Starbucks and neighborhood country clubs, wasn't really our style—especially not mine. But the girls loved the pool even more than they loved having their own rooms. They didn't seem to notice that we were moving out of shabby university housing to a part of town with two-story houses and two-car garages and green lawns studded with signs supporting high-school football teams. There are several reasons why we did that, but the one you want to hear, of course, is that we thought it would be safer.

"Class dismissed. Don't forget, your final papers are due in my box on the twenty-eighth, no later than five o'clock." By the time I get to "Have a nice summer," most of them are out of the door already.

As I walk down the hall to my office, I feel a light *brr* against my hip. It's a text from Tom.

Can you pick up Jane? IAH 4:05, United 1093.

I put the phone down, turn to my computer, and look up the University of Washington academic calendar. Then I check the university directory and call up a University of Washington administrator I know from grad school. A brief conversation follows.

I text Tom back. *Should I get dinner too?*

A few minutes later: *Nope.* And that's apparently all Tom and I are going to say to each other about Jane coming home early from her freshman year of college.

It's tricky picking Jane out of a crowd these days. You never know what color her hair is going to be. I stand close to baggage carousel 9 and wait until a tall girl with burgundy-black hair emerges from the crowd of passengers, a lock of faded-out green dangling in front of her eyes, having survived yet another dye job intact.

"Hi, Mom," she says.

"Hi, Jane." We hug, her heavy satchel thwacking my hip as she leans over, and then the empty baggage carousel utters a shuddering shriek and we both turn to look at it while I decide how best not to ask about her unexpected arrival.

"You changed your hair again," I observe.

"Yep."

Everything Jane says and does is a variation on the slammed door that first became her calling card in middle school, a couple of years after Julie was taken. In high school, Jane added loud music, hair dye, and random piercings to her repertoire, but the slammed door remained the centerpiece of the performance. Tom used to follow her dutifully up the stairs, where he weathered the sobs and yells I heard only in muffled form. I figured she needed her privacy.

"Did you have a good flight?"

"It was okay."

It was long. I suspect Jane chose the University of Washington because of its distance from Houston. When she was a little girl she used to say she wanted to go to the university where I teach, but the pennants came down around the same time the door slamming began. She might have ended up in Alaska if she hadn't insisted on going to a school that had quarters instead of semesters—every possible difference a crucial one. All typical teenage behavior, no doubt, but with Jane, it made a particular kind of perverse sense—as does the fact that, according to the registrar, she took incompletes in all her spring-quarter classes.

This after she'd stayed in Seattle through the entire school year. I didn't think much about her not coming home for Thanksgiving; it's commonly skipped by students on the quarter system, since the fall quarter starts so late. But when she explained to us over the phone in mid-December that she was just settling in, that one of her professors had invited her to a holiday dinner, that our family never really celebrated Christmas anyway, did we?, and that she felt like it would be good for her sense of independence to stay, I could practically hear Tom's heart breaking over the extension. I covered for his silence by saying the sensible thing, the only possible thing, really: "We'll miss you, of course, but we understand."

Now it seems the whole holiday situation was yet another slammed door to which I'd failed to respond properly.

"So," I say, starting again. "You still enjoying U-Dub?"

"Go Huskies," she says with a limp fist-pump. "Yeah, Mom. Nothing's really changed since last time we talked." The bags start dropping onto the conveyor belt, and we both lean forward.

"Was that coat warm enough for January up there? Winter stuff is on clearance, we could go shopping."

She picks self-consciously at the army jacket she's worn since she was sixteen. "This is fine. I told you guys, it doesn't get that cold."

"Classes going okay?"

"Yeah," she says. "Why?"

"Just making small talk."

"Well, they're going really well," she says. "Actually, they're going so well, my professors are letting me turn in papers in lieu of exams."

In lieu of exams! That sounds official. I wonder how she got them to agree to give her incompletes rather than failing her. My students usually just say "Family emergency" and hope I don't press them for details.

Carefully, I ask, "Is that something they do a lot at U-Dub?"

"Mom," she says. "Just say 'University of Washington.'"

I give her shoulder a quick squeeze. "We're just glad you're home." I lower my arm and we stand there, side by side, staring at the shiny metal chute, until half the passengers on the flight have claimed their bags and wheeled them off, their absence making the juddering of the conveyor belt sound even louder. Finally, Jane's rolling suitcase somersaults down the chute and thunks onto the belt in front of us. It was a graduation present—apple green and already dingy from its maiden voyage to Seattle and back, it almost matches her dyed-green streak. She grabs the suitcase before I can make a move but lets me take her satchel when she stops to peel off her army jacket in the blast of humid air that hits us outside the automatic sliding doors.

"I see we're in swamp mode already."

"No place like home," I reply and am rewarded with a half smile of acknowledgment.

The ride home is rocky, though. I'm shooting blanks on college life despite spending most of my time in a university.

"How are the dorms?"

"Pretty good."

"You still like your roommate?"

"She's fine. We stay out of each other's way."

"Are you going to room with her next year?"

"Probably not."

Finally I resort to a subject I'm sure will get results, although it pains me. "So, tell me about this English professor you ate Christmas dinner with."

"Her name is Caitlyn, and actually she's a professor of semiotics."

Caitlyn. "I didn't know they still taught semiotics in English departments."

"The course is called Intersectionalities. It's an English class, but it's cross-listed with linguistics, gender studies, and anthro. There are supposed to be all these prerequisites, but I went to Caitlyn's office hours on the first day and convinced her to let me in."

I can't help but feel a glow of pride. A true professor's kid, Jane knows all the angles. Moreover, this is the longest string of consecutive words she's spoken to me without Tom around for ages. "Tell me more about it, what did you read?"

"I think I'd rather wait and talk about it with Dad too," she says.

"Of course," I say.

"I don't want to say it all twice."

"Sure, sweetie."

I turn on NPR, and the measured, comforting sound of rush-hour news commentary fills the car as we inch past a firing range and a gym where an Olympian gymnastics coach is probably even now yelling at ponytailed girls in formation. Jane stares out her window. I assume she is wondering why Tom didn't come to pick her up instead of me. I'm wondering too.

A few minutes later we both find out. Pulling into the driveway, the sky just starting to glow with dusk, I spot Tom through the kitchen window, making dinner. As I open the door and walk in, I smell Jane's favorite pasta dish: fettuccine Alfredo tossed with breaded shrimp and grilled asparagus, a ridiculously decadent recipe Tom got off the Food Network and makes only on special occasions. An expiatory salad of fresh greens is in a bowl next to the cutting board, ready to join the bright Fiestaware on the dining-room table.

"Janie!" Tom opens his arms and steps forward, and Jane throws her arms around him, squeezing her eyes shut against his chest. I slip off to the bathroom, then to the bedroom to change out of my teaching outfit into more comfortable jeans, loitering for a few minutes to put away some laundry that's been sitting, folded, in a basket at the foot of the bed. When I return, they are talking animatedly, Tom's back to me as he chops heirloom tomatoes for the salad, Jane resting the tips of her fingers on the butcher block as if playing a piano.

"Dad, you would not believe the names people were throwing around in this class," she says. "Derrida, stuff like that. Everyone was so much smarter than me."

"Hey, she let you in, and she's the MacArthur Genius lady."

"Every time I opened my mouth I sounded like an idiot."

"At least you opened your mouth," he says, resting the knife to

the side of the cutting board for a moment while he looks her in the eye. "I bet there were some people who were too scared to talk."

Jane's grateful smile, just visible over Tom's shoulder, curdles me like milk. As if he can sense it, Tom turns around and sees me standing there. He throws a handful of chopped tomatoes onto the pile of greens and picks up the salad bowl.

"Everything's ready!" he says. "Grab the pasta, Jane. Let's sit down and eat our first family dinner in God knows how long."

And that, believe it or not, is when the doorbell rings.