

**'The best crime
novel I've read in
a very long time'**

VAL McDERMID

One quick decision ...

SNAP

could be her last

BELINDA BAUER

About the Book

SNAP DECISIONS CAN BE DANGEROUS...

On a stifling summer's day, eleven-year-old Jack and his two sisters sit in their broken-down car, waiting for their mother to come back and rescue them. *Jack's in charge*, she'd said. *I won't be long.*

Three years later, Jack is still in charge – of his sisters, of supporting them all, of making sure nobody knows they're alone in the house, and – quite suddenly – of finding out the truth about what happened to his mother...

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Also by Belinda Bauer

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SNAP

Belinda Bauer

For my wonderful agent, Jane Gregory.
Happy thirtieth birthday!

There are two kinds of people in the world. Those
who think it could never happen to them. And those
who know it will ...

20 August 1998

IT WAS SO hot in the car that the seats smelled as though they were melting. Jack was in shorts, and every time he moved his legs they sounded like Sellotape.

The windows were down, but no air moved; only small bugs whirred, with a sound like dry paper. Overhead hung a single frayed cloud, while an invisible jet drew a chalky line across the bright blue sky.

Sweat trickled down the back of Jack's neck, and he cracked open the door.

'Don't!' said Joy. 'Mum said stay!'

'I *am* staying,' he said. 'Just trying to get cool.'

It was a quiet afternoon and there wasn't much traffic, but every time a car passed, the old Toyota shook a little.

When a lorry passed, it shook a lot.

'Shut the door!' said Joy.

Jack shut the door and made a tutting sound. Joy was a drama queen. Nine years old and always bursting into tears or song or laughter. She usually got her own way.

'How long now?' she whined.

Jack looked at his watch. He'd got it last birthday when he'd turned eleven.

He'd asked for a PlayStation.

'Twenty minutes,' he said.

That was a lie. It was nearly an hour since the car had coughed and jerked and rolled to a crunchy halt on the hard shoulder of the southbound M5 motorway. That made it over half an hour since their mother had left them here to walk to an emergency phone.

Stay in the car. I won't be long.

Well, she *was* being long – and Jack got that niggly of irritation he always felt when his mother was not his father. Dad would have known what was wrong with the car. He wouldn't have sat turning the key over and over until the battery ran flat. He would have had a mobile, and not had to walk up the road to find an emergency phone like a caveman.

Merry grizzled and wriggled against the straps of her car seat, the sun on her face making her restless.

Joy leaned over and put her dummy back in.

‘Shit, it’s hot,’ said Jack.

‘You said shit,’ said Joy. ‘I’m telling.’ But she didn’t say it with her usual conviction. It was too hot for conviction.

Baking hot.

For a while, they played ‘I Spy’. S for Sky and R for Road and F for Field, until they exhausted the limited supply of real stuff and started on stupid things like YUF for Your Ugly Face.

‘Shut up!’ said Joy.

Jack was going to say *YOU shut up!* But then he decided not to, because he was the oldest and he was in charge. Mum had said so ...

Jack’s in charge.

... so instead he spied D for Dust and looked up the road and tried to guess how far the phone might be, and how fast his mother had walked there with her slow, pregnant waddle, and how long she had stayed on the phone. He didn’t know any of the answers but he felt instinctively that she had been gone for too long.

She’d pulled over in the shade of a short row of conifers, but their shadows had shortened to nothing.

He squinted into the vicious sun.

If he just looked away, and then back again, he would see her come around the bend. He imagined it. He willed it to happen.

If he just looked away.

And then back again.

Slowly.

She would be there.

She would be there ...

She wasn’t there.

‘Where is she?’ said Joy and kicked the back of the seat. ‘She said ten minutes and she’s been ten hours!’

In the front seat, Merry started to cry.

‘Look what you did!’ Jack hung over the seat and fussed over Merry and gave her the bottle, but she only had one suck of water and then pushed the teat out of her mouth so she could go on grizzling.

‘She hates you,’ said Joy with smug satisfaction, and so Jack sat down again and let her have a go, but it turned out that Merry hated everybody, and cried and cried.

And cried.

Merry was two but still did a lot of crying. Jack didn’t like her much.

‘Maybe she needs a new nappy,’ said Joy warily. ‘There’s one in the bag.’

‘She’ll stop in a minute,’ said Jack. He wasn’t doing a nappy.

Neither was Joy; she didn’t mention the nappy again – just bit her lip and frowned at the bend in the road.

‘Where is she?’ she said again – but this time in a voice that was so small and scared that Jack had to do something or he’d get scared too.

Scareder.

‘Let’s go and meet her,’ he said suddenly.

‘How?’

‘Just walk,’ said Jack. ‘It’s not far. Mum said so.’

‘If it’s not far, why isn’t she back?’

Jack ignored the question and opened the door.

‘Won’t she be angry we didn’t stay like she told us?’

‘No. She’ll be pleased we went to find her.’

Joy’s eyes became big and round. ‘Is she lost?’

‘No!’

Her bottom lip trembled. ‘Are we lost?’

‘No! Nobody’s lost! I’m just hot and bored and want to walk about a bit, that’s all. You can come with me or you can stay here.’

‘I don’t want to stay here,’ said Joy quickly.

‘Then come,’ said Jack.

‘What about Merry?’

‘She can walk.’

‘She won’t, though.’

‘We’ll carry her then.’

‘She’s too heavy.’

‘I’ll carry her.’

‘What about the cars?’ Joy said at the sparkling flashes that whooshed past. There weren’t many, but they were fast. ‘It’s too dangerous,’ she added softly.

That was what their mother had said when they had wanted to go with her to the phone.

It’s too dangerous.

‘Come on,’ said Jack. ‘Everything will be OK. I promise.’

Joy carried the baby bag, and Jack carried the baby.

She refused to walk, of course.

The breathless air twitched in the wake of each car, then flopped down dead in the dust again.

They walked right up close to the crash barrier. The strip of wavy steel was much bigger than it looked from a speeding car – elbow-high, and

nearly down to the cuff of Jack's blue soccer shorts. The ground on the other side of the barrier was covered with long brittle grass. It fell steeply away into scrub and small trees, and then bottomed out. Beyond that were hedges and beyond the hedges were fields. Grass. A few sheep. Mostly the fields were empty, and the nearest barns were far away – little brick toys with corrugated roofs.

The hard shoulder was wide, but it wasn't empty. It always looked that way from the car, so Jack was surprised to see that it was actually full of things. Coke cans and workmen's gloves and bits of plastic pipe and soft toys – a random collection, united by having been squashed flat and covered with the same fine, grey dust.

'What if a car stops?' said Joy. 'Should we get in?'

'Of course not,' he snorted. Everyone knew that getting in a stranger's car was a good way to get murdered.

Joy knew it too, and seemed reassured that her brother wasn't taking any chances.

Jack turned to look back at their car. It sparkled in the blinding light but already seemed a long way away – as if it were a boat sinking in a deep ocean, and once it was gone they would never be able to reach it again.

Or maybe *they* were sinking ...

Merry was heavy, and all the heavier for being fractious and whiny. Her face was red and screwed up and she wriggled like a lead worm in Jack's arms.

'The sun's in her face,' he said. 'Is there a hat in the bag?'

They stopped and Joy put the bag on the ground so she could look in it.

'No. Only a bib.' She held it up to him, squinting in the white-hot sun. The bib was yellow with a blue duck on it. Jack draped it over Merry's head and she calmed down a bit.

They walked on.

'My feet hurt.' Joy was wearing silly pink flip-flops with a plastic flower between her first two toes.

'Not far now,' said Jack, although he had no idea how far it was to anywhere. It was just something his father said. He glanced over his shoulder; their car had disappeared around the bend.

They were completely alone.

Jack wished Dad were here. He could have carried Merry and Joy and the baby bag.

Easily.

His arms ached, so he put Merry down and tried to make her walk, but she still wouldn't, even though she could. She hung back and stiffened up,

so he couldn't drag her along.

He wanted to smack her.

Instead he blew out his cheeks and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, then hoisted her up again and went on.

A lorry horn blared as it roared past, and the bib blew off Merry's head and fluttered over the crash barrier.

'Oh!'

Joy stood on her toes to reach over the barrier for it, but another car went by and the bib leapt off the tops of the stiff yellow grass and floated down the steep slope.

'Leave it!' said Jack.

'But it's the one with the duck!'

Jack kept walking and, after a moment, Joy caught up with him. She kept looking back at the bright spot of bib.

'I wish I had an ice cream,' she said.

Jack ignored her but he wished he had an ice cream too. A lolly would do. His mouth was so dry. He wondered whether it was possible to die of thirst in the middle of the lush Devonshire countryside.

It felt possible.

He hated his mother. He hated her. Why couldn't they have gone with her? Why did she say she wouldn't be long when she was long?

When they found her, he wouldn't speak to her. That would show her! He should just slide down the bank right here, find a gate in a hedge, walk to a farmhouse, get a drink and a phone.

Call Daddy.

Let him be in charge.

Let her worry when she got back to the car and found them gone ...

But he didn't do any of that.

They reached a scrubby little apple tree and lingered for a moment in its latticed shade. Jack put Merry down with a groan. Immediately she plumped down on the cushion of her nappy among the small, bright fruit that had spilled across the hard shoulder.

'Don't put her on the ground,' said Joy. 'It's filthy!'

'I don't care. She weighs a ton.'

'So does this bag.' Joy dropped it and picked an apple off the tree. It was red, but when she nibbled it, it was hard and sour and she spat it on to the tarmac. Instead she suckled water from Merry's bottle, then offered it to Jack. They took turns until it was all gone.

'We should have saved some for Merry,' said Joy.

'Too late now,' said Jack.

Cars passed. Nobody stopped.

‘Let’s go,’ said Jack.

‘I don’t want to,’ said Joy. ‘It’s too hot.’

‘We have to. We’re not going to find Mum by sitting around here.’

Joy squinted up the road. It was long and straight and there was no sign of their mother or anybody else on the hard shoulder – only a shimmering lake, like a desert mirage.

‘I want to go back.’

Jack took the key out of his pocket and held it out. ‘OK,’ he said, ‘here’s the key.’

Joy didn’t take it. She looked around at the bend that now hid the car, then sighed and said, ‘The bag is soooo heavy.’

‘Leave it then. Just bring a nappy so Mum can change her.’

That’s what they did. Joy took out a nappy and Jack jammed the baby bag carefully into the narrow gap where the apple tree almost touched the crash barrier, so that nobody could see it but they could find it again when they all got back to the car.

Then he picked up Merry and they carried on walking.

On the opposite carriageway a blue car slowed down in the fast lane and the driver stared at them. Jack looked away, his heart fluttering with groundless fear, until the car’s engine faded away.

Merry wriggled on his hip and started to bawl again – ‘Mama! Mama!’ – her chubby arms and splayed fingers reaching out towards the car that was already too far behind them to return to.

‘Mama’s not there,’ said Jack. ‘She’s this way. We’re going to find her.’

Merry’s bawling faded slowly until finally she put her arms around his neck and her cheek on his shoulder, and emitted a low, gravelly drone that pulsed to the rhythm of his footsteps.

Joy stopped and said, ‘What’s that?’

Up ahead, three crows pecked and hopped over a bloody lump.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is it something dead?’

‘I don’t know.’

But it was something dead. As they got closer they could hear the flies.

It was a dead fox – squashed flat, but not yet covered in dust – its slick pink guts bulging from a tear in the orange fur. The crows were fighting over its eyes.

Jack couldn’t look. He swallowed the disgust in his throat, while Joy waved her arms at the crows. They flapped away – but only a few feet – then hopped back again.

‘Yaaa!’ she shouted. ‘Yaaaaaaa!’

But the crows laughed and lurched around her like a cruel gang.

She rushed at them.

‘JOY!’

Jack grabbed her arm and a car split the air with its angry horn as it swerved to miss her.

Joy looked at him – her eyes huge in her white face, her mouth an ‘O’ of shock.

Then they both laughed. High and cackling, like the crows. It wasn’t funny laughter, but they kept on anyway, like playing laughter chicken, long after the mirth had run out and their faces started to ache.

Then Jack pointed over Joy’s shoulder.

‘There’s the phone!’

A hundred yards away was a small orange lollipop.

They hurried away from the dead fox with new urgency. Jack walked so fast that it was almost jogging. Joy took hold of the back of his T-shirt, as if she were scared she might be uncoupled from their little train and left behind. Jack’s arms ached and sweat burned his eyes. Merry’s dangling feet kicked his thighs and Joy’s tugging unbalanced him, but he didn’t slow down. Not until they were thirty or forty yards from the phone. Then he started to look around for his mother – over the barrier and down the grass slope. And even further, into the trees and the hedges and the fields beyond, his desperate eyes sought clues.

Maybe she had fallen, or was waiting on the other side of the barrier. Maybe she was watching them approach now, and waving. Waiting for them to see her. When he saw her, he would wave back. He would speak to her. Of course he would! Everything bad would be forgotten! He was excited by the anticipation of relief.

‘Where is she?’ said Joy.

Jack ignored her.

‘Jack?’

‘Sssh.’

He hurried on, frowning. Ten yards from the phone, he stopped.

The orange receiver was dangling from the box. It hung down, just touching the tops of the yellow grass, motionless on its twisted wire.

Jack got a very bad feeling.

It was all wrong.

All, all wrong.

Joy moved. She let go of Jack’s shirt and brushed past him. ‘It’s broken,’ she said, and reached for the phone.

‘Don’t touch it!’ he yelled, and she burst into tears.

They walked another quarter-mile through the stifling air.

Still nobody stopped.

Nobody wanted to get involved.

People in cars – families! – with air-con and mobile phones and Coca-Colas drove past them, while Joy sobbed quietly and Jack kept carrying Merry.

Kept walking, although he couldn’t feel his legs.

Or his heart.

It wasn’t until they were halfway up the slip-road that a car finally slowed and then ground to a halt on the gravel ahead of them.

They stopped, trembling and tear-stained, and exhausted by heat and by fear.

There was a long, hot blink of arid time.

Then the car door creaked open, and a policeman stepped out.

2001

CATHERINE WHILE WOKE with a start and the feeling – the certainty – that somebody was in the house.

‘Adam?’

Adam wasn’t there. He was in Chesterfield. Catherine knew that because only yesterday he’d sent her a postcard of the bus station with an ironic doodle on it.

And yet she called out again.

‘Adam?’

Nothing. Just that creepy feeling that she was not alone. The streetlamp outside the window flickered and went out, leaving her momentarily blind.

It felt ... planned.

‘Adam?’ she whispered into the blackness.

‘Prrrrrp!’

Catherine squeaked as the cat landed on her legs.

‘Get off, Chips!’

She sat up with a grunt and a series of awkward wiggles under the weight of her occupied belly, and shooed the cat off the bed.

‘Don’t panic,’ she told her tummy firmly. ‘It’s only the cat.’

Adam had had a second cat, called Fish, who had been squashed by a car before they’d met. Catherine had made a sympathetic face, of course, but secretly she had been relieved to hear it. One cat was more than enough to worry about sitting on the baby’s face. Chips was a fluffy white rag-doll, with fetching blue eyes, but Catherine wasn’t a cat person. That didn’t make her a dog person, mind – she’d never had a pet of any description, not even a goldfish – but in the two years she and Adam had been together, she’d learned enough to know she definitely wasn’t a cat person.

He was. He was all over the cat, and the cat – and its hair – was all over him. Catherine was sure that cats had their place in the grand scheme of things – but she was equally sure that that place wasn’t shitting in a box in a corner of the kitchen.

Or jumping on her bed.

She must have left the bedroom door ajar last night, and Chips had seen his chance to reassert his right as a cat to lie on his minion’s pillow, and to piddle freely in his sock drawer.

Catherine hissed, and Chips stepped haughtily out of the room with a look over his shoulder that said, *I'll remember this.*

'Do your worst,' said Catherine defiantly, and lay back on her pillow.

At least Chips had brought her back from her fright.

Catherine clasped her hands over her stomach – amazed and amused by how far away it was from what she'd always thought of as her body. The first few months had been nothing really – a bit of a tum, of the sort that might quickly disappear after a few weeks on an exercise bike. Then the bulge had become big enough to celebrate by leaning back and sticking it out – like carrying a potted plant in from the garden. Now, seven months in, getting out of a chair felt more like hoisting a bag of compost on to a trolley at B&Q.

She couldn't wait for the day when the baby was laid on her breast, red and screwed up and bawling ...

I'll never let anything hurt you!

The vehement promise was not something Catherine had ever formulated or decided. It came unbidden and at random times, straight from her heart, in the same way she imagined the baby would come from her womb – in a rush of emotion that brought tears to her eyes and steel to her spine.

She wiped her eyes on the heel of her hand and sighed and cursed Chips. She was going to need all the sleep she could get quite soon, and resented missing out on even a wink.

Dr Samuels had told her to create the utmost serenity for herself and her unborn child.

Utmost serenity.

The doctor had actually used those words and Catherine had actually laughed at them. But the longer her pregnancy went on, the more she could see the value of utmost serenity, and she had started to meditate and light candles, and to read trashy novels in the bath. She had foot massages and kale smoothies and went to weekly antenatal classes, where she rolled around on her back like a stuck beetle while Adam helped her to breathe and to push and to giggle helplessly in supposed readiness for what was to come.

Catherine decided to read herself back to sleep. She had a tempting To Be Read pile, but her hormones kept drawing her compulsively to *The Big Book of Baby Names*. It was silly really; she and Adam both preferred traditional names, and the book was full of ridiculous ones. Plus, they'd sort of settled already on Alice for a girl and Frank for a boy, for her grandmother and his father. But while she knew she was never going to

call her baby Bunker or Crimpelene, Catherine felt duty bound not to overlook even a remote possibility.

She turned to switch on the lamp, but stopped with her hand in mid air.

There was a noise.

She couldn't identify quite what or where it was, but it sounded like somebody trying not to make a sound.

Somebody in the house.

Catherine's neck prickled with ancient warning.

She was thirty-one and had lived alone all her adult life until she'd moved in with Adam nearly two years before. When you lived alone, and you heard a noise in the night, you didn't cower under the bedclothes and wait for your fate to saunter up the stairs and down the hallway. When you lived alone, you got up and grabbed the torch, the bat, the hairspray, and you sneaked downstairs to confront ...

The dishwasher.

Which was the only thing that had ever made a noise loud enough to wake her.

But she hadn't set the dishwasher ...

Catherine wasn't as well prepared as she used to be – and was a lot more pregnant than she'd ever been. But there was nobody here but her. And so, with a muffled grunt, she swung her legs out of bed and rocked to her feet.

She crept on to the landing and picked up the vase from the bookshelf. It was chunky Swedish glass and she'd never liked it. Throwing it at an intruder would kill two birds with one stone.

She took a deep breath, then snapped on the landing light and yelled, 'Whoever's there had better get the hell out of this house! I've called the police and I'm armed!'

She started down the stairs, holding the vase at shoulder height, feeling both terrified and idiotic. At the bottom she stopped and listened again.

Nothing.

Had she been mistaken? It wouldn't be the first time. Being alone in a house made every noise louder. Scarier. If she'd been sure, she'd have called the police, and she hadn't – even though the phone was right next to Adam's side of the bed ...

She adjusted the vase in her right hand, and moved cautiously from room to room. She gained courage with each doorway she passed through. The lounge and the dining room and the kitchen.

There was nobody there.

Catherine put the vase down on the kitchen table next to her camera and phone, and blew out her cheeks in relief – glad to be wrong.

Then she stared at her camera and phone. She didn't remember leaving them on the table. Why would she? And Adam's laptop was beside them, when it was always on the desk in the study—

Son of a bitch!

Catherine understood in a flash. The items were on the table next to the back door so that the burglar could pick them up on his way out!

Breathless with panic, she checked the door. It was unlocked! She had locked it, she was sure of that. The intruder must have left through it when she'd shouted – not even stopping to grab his loot!

Quickly she locked it again, and then pressed herself desperately against the cold glass – cupping her hands around her face to see into the night.

Then she sucked in her breath as a liquid black shape detached itself from the shadow of the house and flitted through the shrubbery and over the fence, like oil.

'I see you!' she shouted. 'I see you, you bastard!'

Her heart hammered but the words gave her strength.

And then it was over.

He was there and he was gone.

She was scared and she was safe.

It was over, and the patch of condensation her shout had left on the glass shrunk slowly away to nothing.

Catherine stepped back from the door. Her legs shook, and she sat down and put a trembling hand on her belly.

Her mind flitted through the events – darting back and forth between cause and consequence, and what was and what might have been, until it finally started to settle and function at a more normal rate.

She was OK.

They were OK.

Nothing bad had happened. Nothing had been taken.

Those were the most important things. The basics.

But there was more. She also hadn't panicked. She hadn't screamed. She hadn't hidden under the bed. She hadn't had to be rescued by a man. She'd been brave and she'd been clever.

Catherine had almost forgotten what independence felt like, and she went back upstairs with a tiny grain of pride starting to swell in her chest.

She went into the bedroom and closed the door firmly behind her and let out an enormous sigh of relief. Then she turned to the bed and her stomach clenched so hard that the baby kicked back.

The bedside lamp was on.

It hadn't been on. Her hand had stopped in mid air, remember? She *knew* she hadn't turned it on.

And in the little pool of light, there was a knife.

Not a kitchen knife.

A *real* knife.

Catherine moved without walking.

She looked down on the knife.

A bright blade – serrated on one edge, curved on the other to a cruel point; the handle inlaid with pearly clouds reflected in a petrol sea of ...

Abalone.

The word surfaced from the deep ocean of her mind and felt right, even though she wasn't sure what abalone was. The pale shell was so serene, so beautiful, that surely the blade could not be as brutal as it looked? As if from a great distance, Catherine watched her own hand reach out and touch a brief finger to the point.

She gasped as electricity raced up her arm and neck to the top of her head. Tears sprang to her eyes and a tiny red ball swelled from the pad of her forefinger and sat there shining like a ruby in a Swiss watch.

She put her finger in her mouth with a shudder.

And noticed the birthday card.

Flowers in a bucket. *To my Daughter on your Special Day.* Her mother chose the worst cards. A week after her birthday Catherine had bundled it up with all her others and put them in a drawer in the spare room.

And yet, here it was, next to her bed ...

She felt disorientated, as if this were a dream, or a time warp.

She opened the card.

Her mother's scratchy signature had been roughly crossed out and on the blank side of the card was scrawled a new message ...

I could have killed you.

August 1998

IT HAD BEEN a week.

A week when nobody spoke above a whisper, apart from Merry, who cried as often and as loudly as she liked, until a neighbour they called Auntie, but wasn't, came and took her away, 'Just until Eileen comes home.'

When she'd gone, the quiet house got *so quiet* that the silence itself was nearly a noise.

Jack and Joy didn't go to school. It wasn't as much fun as it sounded. They played cards, or watched cartoons with the sound down, between the silhouettes of policemen who wandered in and out like clumsy ghosts. The head policeman had a moustache as big as a cowboy's. 'Call me Ralph,' he told them, but they called him nothing – just watched him go in and out of the kitchen with papers and pictures, to say secret things to their father.

When they were hungry, they ate cereal straight from the packet. When they were thirsty, they drank from the tap. When they were tired, they leaned against each other on the sofa like penguins in a snowstorm and slept awkward, restless sleeps where they dreamed of hot, dusty tarmac and of nobody stopping.

Nobody getting involved.

Now and then, their father would look up as if he had just remembered them and say, 'Are you two all right?' and Jack and Joy would both nod furiously, because he was very busy with the police and with the papers, and because if they said they were *not* all right, maybe another Auntie they didn't even know would come and take them away like Merry.

The newspapers came through the door every morning in a series of thuds, like dead birds falling out of the sky and on to the mat.

Every paper, every day.

Their father sat at the kitchen table, obsessively reading and rereading every word anyone knew or had guessed about his wife's disappearance – bent close to the pages to glean more meaning, his lips moving and his fingers darkening with newsprint. He wouldn't throw a single paper away in case he'd missed something, and kept every copy in a pile that grew shockingly fast.

Jack and Joy weren't supposed to read the papers, but they sneaked a peek now and then when their father was upstairs, discovering in random