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#1 BESTSELLING
CO-AUTHOR OF
THE WIFE BETWEEN US

GONE TONIGHT

A NOVEL

GONE TONIGHT

SARAH PEKKANEN



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For Margaret Riley King

Find a part of yourself hidden in the twilight.

—Fennel Hudson

**ACT
ONE**

CHAPTER ONE

CATHERINE

My mother walks through our tiny living room, her eyes sweeping over our old blue couch and coffee table, before she briefly disappears into the galley kitchen.

“I just had them in my hand.” Her voice is tinged with something darker than frustration as she begins another lap.

I should jump up from the couch and help her look for her keys so she isn’t late for her shift at the diner.

But I don’t want her to notice I’ve begun to tremble.

“Check your purse again?” I suggest.

She frowns and reaches into her shoulder bag.

My mother is organized. Methodical. Detail oriented. Her purse isn’t a jumble of crumpled receipts and loose change. Sunglasses in a case, small bills facing the same way in her wallet, cherry ChapStick and hand lotion zipped into her makeup bag—it’s containers within a container.

She shakes her head and walks to the raincoat hanging on a hook by our front door, searching through its pockets.

Maybe her father is absentminded. Perhaps her cousins grew distracted when they approached middle age. It could be something our relatives tease each other about when they gather for holidays.

I don’t know. I’ve never met them.

When I had to create a family tree in the fourth grade, I was able to fill out only two names on a single branch. My mother’s and mine.

My stomach tightens as I watch her bend down and check around the mat by the front door where we put our shoes. She looks even thinner than usual in her uniform of black slacks and matching polo shirt with a red waitressing apron tied around her waist.

She hasn't been able to eat for the past few days. At night I hear her restless movements through the thin wall that separates our bedrooms.

Tomorrow she has an appointment with a neurologist.

Everyone loses their keys, I tell myself. The neurologist will have a simple explanation for my mother's strange new symptoms. He'll prescribe medication and advise her to get more sleep and send us on our way.

But my pulse is accelerating.

I force myself to inhale slow, even breaths. The worst thing I can do is fall apart. My nursing classes taught me about the power the body wields over the mind, and vice versa. Right now I need a steady physiology to assert control.

It works. After a minute, I feel able to stand. I walk over to my mom, thinking hard, then dip my hand into the big pocket of her apron.

Relief crashes over her face as I pull out her keys.

"I'm losing my mi-"

"Could you grab another box if the diner has any?"

I don't really need more moving boxes. I just couldn't bear to hear her complete that sentence.

I already have a half-dozen cardboard boxes I pulled out of a recycling bin behind a liquor store. I don't own many possessions and I pack quickly. I've had plenty of practice.

When families move out of houses in the suburbs, neighbors throw going-away parties and the moms get weepy after a few glasses of wine.

People like us, we move on to a new apartment and no one notices.

I'd planned to sort through my books and clothes this morning. But until we see the specialist, everything feels suspended in midair.

My mom rises to her tiptoes to kiss my cheek, then opens the door and is gone, her footsteps growing fainter.

I wait for silence. Then I reach for my phone and call up the list I'm secretly compiling.

Misplacing her keys might not be another piece of evidence. Still, I document it along with today's date.

Then my eyes roam over the dozen other incidents I've recorded of all the things my mother has lost—a twenty-dollar bill, her train of thought, her way home from the drugstore that's just a mile away.

All happened within the past month.

CHAPTER TWO

RUTH

I'm good at disappearing. We women do it all the time.

We vanish in the eyes of men when we hit our forties. We dive into roles like motherhood and our identities slip away. We disappear at the hands of predators. We're conditioned to shrink, to drop weight, to take up less physical space in the world.

"Hi, I'm Ruth, and I'll be your server."

I spoke that line at least twenty times during my shift today. It's a safe bet none of the customers I greeted could repeat my name five seconds later.

That's a good thing. Being inconspicuous suits me.

No one takes notice of me as I walk down the path parallel to the Susquehanna River, watching its surface gently ripple as the current draws it beneath the South Street Bridge. The air feels swollen with moisture and clouds blot the brightness from the day, but I keep on my dark sunglasses.

My feet ache from fetching sunny-side-up platters and club sandwiches and bottomless coffee refills, but I push myself to move faster.

I didn't tell Catherine I was running an errand on the way home. She may worry if I'm late, especially since I set my phone to airplane mode when I left work so she can't see my destination.

I climb the curving, split staircase that leads to the library entrance. I push open the front door and follow my routine: I make sure no one I recognize is nearby, then choose the most secluded computer.

The old wooden chair creaks as I settle into it and use my library card to gain access to the internet.

It would be easier if I could borrow Catherine's MacBook to do my checking—like I used to until I learned about search histories. Who knew

computers keep tabs on you even after you shut them down? It's creepy.

Now I don't even use my iPhone to google anyone from my past since Catherine and I share a phone plan and I might unknowingly be leaving electronic bread crumbs.

Catherine thinks I don't miss anyone I left behind. I encourage her to believe this because it means fewer questions. But I ache for my dad and brother. Even if they've washed their hands of me. Even if the thought of me conjures disgust in their minds.

After all these years, it's still hard to breathe as I begin my search.

I look in on my little brother first, connecting with him in the only way I can. Timmy has a Facebook page, but it's set to private so what I can see is limited. His profile picture shows his two-year-old twins. His daughter has a smile that looks like mischief brewing. His son is a near replica of Timmy when he was young, and I wonder if he'll live for baseball and ice cream, too.

I stare at Tim—he must've shed his childhood nickname—wondering how he met his wife and what he tells her about me. If he mentions me at all.

I search for my father next. There's nothing new, just a few grainy photos I've seen countless times, and in those it's hard to make out his face clearly.

Still, I soak him in, trying to conjure the sound of his voice—husky yet tender—when he tucked me in at night, and the way he would rest his cool palm on my forehead when I had a fever as if he could pull the sickness out of me.

What I would give to feel his arms wrap around me one more time and inhale the warm, woody scent of the Old Spice he wore.

When I left my parents' house as a teenager with nothing but a few changes of clothes, a little money, and a gold watch, I knew they would be relieved I was gone and would never try to find me.

One thing kept me from collapsing and giving up: the baby growing inside me.

I may no longer be a daughter or a sister, but I am—and will *always* be—a mother.

Catherine and I have each other. We've never needed anyone else.

The final person I check on is my old boyfriend, James Bates.

There's nothing new on James either. He never married, which I have

mixed feelings about.

There aren't any recent photos of James, so I've constructed an age progression image in my mind: his sandy-colored hair is close-cropped now, graying at the temples. The lean frame he had at nineteen is thicker, and lines bracket his mouth. All this only adds to his appeal.

Late at night is when I think about James the most. When I can't sleep, even though the time my shift will start is drawing closer. I try to imagine what James is doing at that exact same moment, nearly a hundred miles away.

I always come to the same conclusion: He's lying in bed in the darkness, just like me.

I wonder if he's thinking about me, too.

A heavy crack erupts beside me, the noise exploding through the air.

I leap to my feet, twisting toward the sound.

"Sorry." The teenager who dropped a stack of hardback books onto the table next to me shrugs.

"You need to be more careful!" My voice is loud and harsh. Heads swivel in my direction.

I'm no longer invisible.

Which means I need to leave the library as fast as I can.

CHAPTER THREE

CATHERINE

The doctor rises from a chair behind his desk as we enter his office. I'm not sure what I expected, but it isn't this: a small, sterile room with mud-dull carpet and a schoolhouse-style clock hung on the beige wall. But the diplomas displayed on his bookshelf are from good schools, and I've checked him out. He's the best neurologist around.

He walks around his desk, not avoiding our eyes but not smiling either. I can't read a verdict in his expression. He's good at navigating this fraught moment, but then he must have a lot of practice.

"I'm Alan Chen," he introduces himself.

"Nice to meet you," my mother replies. "I'm Ruth Sterling, and this"—she touches my shoulder—"is my daughter, Catherine."

I step forward to shake his hand as his eyes widen in surprise behind his glasses.

Now our roles have shifted and I'm the one who has had practice navigating this uncomfortable moment. Dr. Chen urges us to sit down and offers us water, but all the while I can see him doing the mental math.

My mother has a few silver strands glittering like tinsel in her chocolate-brown hair and slightly crimped skin around her big hazel eyes. She looks her age—forty-two. I look older than my twenty-four years, and I'm told I act it, too. That's probably because smiling isn't a reflex for me the way it's expected to be for young women.

Dr. Chen recovers quicker than most. By the time he is back in his chair, opening the chart on his desk, his expression is inscrutable again.

He jumps right in: "Ruth, can you tell me about some of the symptoms you're experiencing?"

I'm certain that information is already documented in his folder in the

pages of paperwork my mother filled out, along with the results of the blood test from her primary physician that ruled out possibilities like a vitamin B12 deficiency and Lyme disease.

“At first it was little things.” The material of my mother’s slacks rustles as she crosses her legs. “Dumb stuff that happens to everyone. It just started happening more often to me. Like I couldn’t remember the word I wanted. Forgot to unplug the iron. That kind of thing.”

“And you noticed an increase in these sorts of events how long ago?” Dr. Chen prompts.

The silence stretches out. A red button on the doctor’s desk phone begins to flash, but he ignores it. A strange current is humming through the air. It feels electric.

I’m about to break in with the answer—a month ago—when my mom opens her mouth and beats me to it.

“Maybe four months ago.” Her voice is almost a whisper.

I suck in a quick breath and whip my head to the side to look at her. Her expression is calm, but her hands are restless. She’s toying with the delicate topaz ring she always wears, spinning it in circles around her finger.

Dr. Chen jots a note on one of the papers in his file. “And it’s getting worse?”

My mother nods.

I pull my iPhone out of my purse and call up my list.

5/07: Put sunglasses in kitchen drawer.

5/10: Called ice cubes “water squares.”

5/12: Forgot what month it was.

Dr. Chen asks my mom a few more questions, then closes his folder. “There are some tests we can run...”

My throat is so tight I have to clear it before I can speak. “Cognitive tests, or do we go straight to brain imaging?”

My mother leans forward and even now—standing alone in the path of what must feel like a great onrushing cement wall—pride fills her voice. “Catherine’s going to be a nurse. She just graduated cum laude and she’s about to start work at Johns Hopkins Hospital. She’s moving to Baltimore in two weeks.”

“Congratulations,” Dr. Chen tells me. “Hopkins is an impressive place.

What's your specialty?"

"Geriatrics. I work part-time at a nursing home." I watch as the irony hits him. He may be the expert in neurology, but when it comes to my mother's presenting symptoms, I'm no novice.

I'm assigned to the Memory Wing, the section of our facility where people with dementia or Alzheimer's or traumatic brain injuries reside. I see symptoms like the ones my mother is describing nearly every single day.

I refuse to assume the worst, though. I know my job could be shaping my fears, and there might be a simple reason for my mother's confusion and memory lapses.

My mom is petite, but there's nothing soft or weak about her.

She's a fighter. Indestructible. She has to be.

We talk with Dr. Chen about various testing options, but my mom resists scheduling a CT scan. I assume it's because of the expense. We've got a bare-bones health care plan, and after the cost of this appointment our savings account will be one car breakdown away from being demolished. Then something happens that makes me feel as if I've plunged into ice water.

My mom stands up and paces between her chair and the wall. My stomach coils tighter with every step. The longer her pacing, the worse the news. It's as pure a formula as a mathematical proof.

My mom paced when I was in the tenth grade, shortly after I began dating my first boyfriend and was enjoying the best school year of my life—right before she announced she'd lost her job, we were being evicted, and we were moving from Lancaster to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

She paced at Christmastime, when I was four, and then she told me Santa's workshop had had a fire and I wouldn't be getting any presents.

She paced just before she told me why her conservative, religious family had cut her off, why I'd never met any grandparents or aunts or cousins and never would: She got pregnant in high school, her boyfriend denied I was his, and they threw her away—every single one of them did. But she didn't care because I was worth all of them put together.

The wall clock's needle-thin red hand sweeps in relentless circles. It strikes me as unbearably cruel that, as they sit in his office, Dr. Chen's patients are forced to confront the dwindling of the very thing they desire most.

My mother reaches the wall and turns for another lap.

The swelling pressure closes in on me, and my voice sounds as high and panicky as it did when I was a child and awoke from a nightmare: “Mom!”

She stops pacing. She meets my eyes for the first time since we entered the office.

The news she delivers isn't bad.

It's catastrophic.

“There's one thing I didn't put down on the forms. Maybe I just couldn't deal with having to write the words.... My mother and I were estranged, but she passed away right before she turned fifty. An old friend tracked me down years ago to let me know.”

This is the first I've heard of *any* of this.

I'm still reeling as my mom continues, “She died from early-onset Alzheimer's.”

CHAPTER FOUR

RUTH

It turns out there's yet another way to disappear. Your mind can begin to erase itself.

Catherine is driving us home, one hand gripping the steering wheel, the other tucked in mine. I know the look on her face, the set of her jaw. She's holding back tears.

I'm sorry, baby.

I don't say the words because they will send her over the edge, and I'm just barely keeping it together myself.

So I reach for the radio with my free hand. "Thunder Road"—the best version, the haunting, acoustic one from Brisbane—comes on and I exhale, feeling some of the rigidity leave my body.

"What kind of monster doesn't like Springsteen?" I ask.

Catherine doesn't immediately recite her usual comeback and I hold my breath. Then: "A monster with taste."

I leave it there, not replying with my usual: "I should've given you up for adoption."

A thin line can separate laughter and tears, and I don't want to push her in the wrong direction.

Catherine turns onto the highway, heading toward home, and I give her hand a squeeze, then let go. She needs both on the steering wheel. Catherine drives too fast. What's more, she expects everyone on the road to be as quick and decisive as she is, and she isn't grateful for my helpful tips, even though I've been driving a lot longer.

I'm not one of those mothers who deludes myself her kid is an angel—or who flutters around, gushing that I don't know what I did to deserve a daughter like Catherine.

Of course I deserve her. I've devoted my life to raising her well.

Catherine is a competent cook—probably out of necessity—and she's smarter than me, except for her taste in music.

She's a hard worker. She got that from me.

She's not a shouter. She didn't get that from me.

My daughter is tall and fine-boned and graceful, with delicate features that bely her grit and determination. It's like someone waved a magic wand when she was born, gifting her with her grandmother's thick, wheat-colored hair with the slight widow's peak, her grandfather's golden skin, and her father's blue eyes.

Sometimes when I look at my girl, I'm awed that I created something so beautiful.

And sometimes I wonder how different my life would be if I hadn't.

I lower my window a few inches, closing my eyes as fresh, cool air sweeps across my face.

I expect the whole drive home to be silent because Catherine always gets quiet when she hears bad news. It's her pattern. When I tell her something she doesn't like, she slips away, hiding inside herself. You can be right there in the same car, close enough to smell the sweet traces of the shampoo she used this morning, and have absolutely no idea what's going on in her mind. The worse the news, the longer her silence.

I've asked her to tell me, more than once: *You've got plenty of words, can you use some of them?*

I'm just thinking, Mom!

Funny how you can't get your kid to be quiet sometimes, but when you actually want to hear what's going on, they act like you've barged in on them while they're in the bathroom.

The quiet between us isn't so bad right now, though. It's actually a relief.

This appointment was every bit as horrible as I expected—I don't think I'll ever get over watching Catherine's eyes shatter—but now that it's behind us, I know exactly what I want and don't want.

I'm not going to get a CT scan, or a lumbar puncture, or any of the other tests Dr. Chen and Catherine talked about.

I'm not going to see another expert.

I'm going to keep waitressing at the diner and living in our apartment.

And maybe this seems selfish, or narcissistic, or whatever term is in

fashion these days, but what I want more than anything is for Catherine to put off her dream of moving to Baltimore and working at Hopkins.

I need my daughter to stay close to me.

CHAPTER FIVE

CATHERINE

I see my mother every single day, which is to say I don't truly see her at all.

She has always been a touch distracted, but I missed the demarcation line she crossed when she slipped past ordinary forgetfulness into something infinitely darker.

I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself, even though it isn't like she has cancer. Early detection won't make a difference in how this turns out.

The thought is a live wire. I yank my mind away, forcing myself to focus on easing our Bonneville into a tight corner spot in our apartment building's lot.

After we exit our car and push through the heavy side door into the lobby, we discover the elevator is waiting, its arms thrown open to us. It's a minor miracle. With five floors in our building and eight apartments per floor, I usually don't even bother pressing the call button.

As we glide up to the fourth floor, I study my mom, taking her in anew. Trying to see how I could have missed the clues, especially since my job constantly exposes me to tangible evidence of what she will become.

She isn't wearing mismatched shoes or blinking in bewilderment or exhibiting irrational anger, like some of the residents I care for.

If anything, she's too calm. That could be shock.

I catalog the furrow between her brows, her full lips, and the slight sheen to her skin.

"You okay?"

Her question jolts me. I realize the elevator doors have yawned open.

"Sorry." I step onto the diamond-patterned carpet and lead the way