



THE GIRL

WHO WAS

TAKEN

CHARLIE DONLEA



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Books by Charlie Donlea

SUMMIT LAKE

THE GIRL WHO WAS TAKEN

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

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CHARLIE DONLEA



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KENSINGTON BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

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Kensington and the K logo Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016955341

ISBN: 978-1-4967-0100-8

First Kensington Hardcover Edition: May 2017

eISBN-13: 978-1-4967-0101-5

eISBN-10: 1-4967-0101-1

First Kensington Electronic Edition: May 2017

*For Mary
Sister, cheerleader, friend*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to my Kensington family, who made me feel like a superstar as they waited anxiously for my next creation. To my editor, John Scognamiglio, who refused to let me screw up this story, despite my best efforts. Thanks for your guidance and insight, and for letting me know when enough was enough. To my publicist, Morgan Elwell, who does a stellar job getting the word out about my books, and even stashes a few copies in the right places. To the art department for designing a fabulous cover. And to Steven Zacharius, thanks for your encouragement.

Much appreciation to my agent, Marlene Stringer, who took a frantic call from me during the writing of this novel and talked me off the ledge. I've officially added "counselor" to your résumé.

"Write with the door closed. Rewrite with the door open," says Stephen King. When I open the door, the first people I invite in are my wife and sister. You guys are the best First Readers I could ask for. To Amy, for reading the same story over-and-over and pretending to love it more each time. No matter how good a book may be, you only read it twelve times if it's a classic or if your husband wrote it. Thanks for your ideas on how to make the early drafts better, and for letting me know when I finally had the ending correct. To Mary, for the timely brainstorming and late-night texts. I sometimes feel that you put more thought into these stories than I do. And one thing is for certain—you have a sinister mind, which came in very handy for this story.

To Abby and Nolan. I love that you think I'm "really good at writing books," even though you haven't read any of them. But the day is coming when you sit down to read one of my books, and it's a moment of happiness (and angst) that waits in my future. To my parents—Brian, Sandee, Fred and Sue—your support and encouragement mean the world to me. And if you keep rearranging my novels on bookstore shelves, you're going to get me in trouble. So knock it off!

And finally, to the readers. Thank you for taking a chance on my book. I hope it provides you hours of entertainment (and makes you check the

locks at night). Please consider writing a review of this book on any of the many outlets where other readers may find it.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I'm found
Was blind but now I see

The Abduction

Emerson Bay, North Carolina
August 20, 2016
11:22 p.m.

Darkness had forever been part of her life.

She looked for it and flirted with it. Became quaint with it and charmed it in a way foreign to most. Morbidly of late, she convinced herself about the joys of its company. That she preferred the blackness of death to the light of existence. Until tonight. Until she stood in front of an abyss that was dead and blank in a way she had never encountered, a night sky without stars. When Nicole Cutty found herself in this chasm between life and death, she chose life. And she ran like hell.

With no flashlight, the night blinded her as she broke through the front entrance. He was just an arm's length behind, which caused adrenaline to flood her system and drive her for a few strides in the wrong direction until her eyes adjusted to the tarnished glow of the moon. Spotting her car, she reoriented herself and ran for it, fumbling with the handle until she ripped open the door. The keys hung from the ignition and Nicole cranked the engine, shifted into drive, and stepped on the accelerator. She gave the engine too much gas and nearly sideswiped the vehicle in front of her. Her headlights brought to life the ink-black night, and from the corner of her eye she saw a flash of color from his shirt as he appeared from around the hood of the parked car in front of her. She had no time to react. She felt the thud of impact and the awful rocking of the car's suspension as the wheels absorbed the unevenness of his body before regaining traction on the gravel road. Her response came without thought. She pushed the accelerator to the floor and twisted a tight U-turn, then raced down the narrow road, leaving everything behind her.

Nicole jerked the wheel as she skidded onto the main highway, swaying in the driver's seat as the fishtail settled and ignoring the speedometer as it climbed past eighty mph. She flexed her arm from where he'd grabbed her, a deep purple bruise already forming, while her eyes bounced from the windshield to the rearview mirror. Two miles went by before she eased off the gas pedal and the four-cylinder quieted down. Being free gave her no

relief. Too much had happened to believe fleeing could make the problems of tonight disappear. She needed help.

As she turned onto the access road that led back to the beach, Nicole ticked off the people she couldn't ask. Her brain worked that way, in the negative. Before deciding who could assist her, she mentally crossed off the people who would do her harm. Her parents were at the top of the list. The police, a close second. Her friends were possibilities, but they were soft and hysterical and Nicole knew they would panic before she explained even a fraction of what had transpired tonight. Her mind churned, ignoring the only real possibility until she had ruled out all others.

Nicole paused at the stop sign, rolled through it while she grabbed her phone. She needed her sister. Livia was older and smarter. Rational in a way Nicole was not. If Nicole dismissed the last stretch of their lives and ignored the distance between them, she knew she could trust Livia with her life. And even if she wasn't sure about this, she had no other options.

She stuck the phone to her ear and listened to it ring while tears rolled down her cheeks. It was close to midnight. She was a block from the beach party.

“Pick up, pick up, pick up. Please, Livia!”

The Escape

Two Weeks Later

Emerson Bay Forest

September 3, 2016

11:54 p.m.

She pulled the burlap from her head and gasped for air. It took time for her eyes to adjust while amorphous shapes danced in her vision and the blackness faded. She listened for his presence but all she heard was the splattering rain outside. Dropping the burlap bag to the ground, she tiptoed to the bunker door. Surprised to see it opened a crack, she put her face to the crevice between the door and the frame and looked out into the dark forest as rain pelted the trees. She imagined a camera lens trained tightly on her eyeball as she peered through the splinter in the door, and then the camera's focus backing out in a slow reverse zoom that captured first the door, then the bunker, then the trees, and eventually a satellite view of the entire forest. She felt small and weak from this mental picture of herself, all alone in a bunker sunk deep in the woods.

She questioned whether this was a test. If she pushed through the door and stepped into the woods, there was the chance he would be waiting for her. But if the open door and the moment free from her shackle were an oversight, it was his first misstep and the only opportunity she'd had in the last two weeks. This was the first moment she found herself untethered from the wall of her cellar.

With her hands trembling and still bound in front of her, she pushed open the door. The hinges creaked into the night before the slapping rain overwhelmed their whine. She waited a moment, held back by fear. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to think, tried to push away her grogginess brought on by the sedatives. The hours of darkness from the cellar came back to her and flashed in her mind like a lightning storm. So, too, did the promise she made to herself that if an opportunity for escape appeared, she'd take it. She decided days before that she'd rather die fighting for her freedom than walk like a lamb to the slaughter.

She took a hesitant step out of the bunker, into the thick and heavy rain that ran in cold streaks down her face. She took a moment to bathe in the

downpour, to let the water clear the fogginess from her mind. Then, she ran.

The forest was dark and the rain torrent. With tape binding her wrists, she tried to deflect the branches that whipped her face. She stumbled on a log and fell into the slippery leaves before forcing herself up again. She had counted the days and thought she'd been missing for twelve. Maybe thirteen. Stuck in a dark cellar where her captor stowed her and fed her, she may have missed a day when fatigue sent her into a long stretch of sleep. Tonight, he moved her to the forest. Dread had overwhelmed her as she bounced in the trunk, and a nauseous feeling told her the end was near. But now freedom was in front of her; somewhere beyond this forest and the rain and this night, she might find her way home.

She ran blindly, taking erratic turns that stole from her all sense of direction. Finally, she heard the roar of a semi truck as its wheels splashed through the wet pavement. Breathing heavily, she sprinted toward the noise and up an embankment that led to the two-lane highway. In the distance, the truck's red taillights sped on, fading with each second.

She stumbled into the middle of the road and on wobbly legs chased the lights as though she might catch them. The rain pelted her face and matted her hair and drenched her ratty clothing. Barefoot, she continued in a push-slap, push-slap gait brought on by the deep gash on her right foot—suffered during her frantic march through the forest—which trickled a crooked line of blood behind her that the storm worked to erase. Driven by panic that he would come from the forest, she willed herself on with the sensation that he was near, ready to fast-step behind her and pull the sack over her head and bring her back to the cellar with no windows.

Dehydrated and hallucinating, she thought her eyes were deceiving her when she saw it. A tiny white light far off in the distance. She staggered toward it until the light splintered in two and grew in size. She stayed in the middle of the road and waved her bound hands over her head.

The car slowed as it approached, flashed its high beams to illuminate her standing in the road in wet clothes and no shoes, with scratches covering her face and blood dripping down her neck to dye her T-shirt red.

The car stopped, wipers throwing water to each side. The driver's door opened. "Are you okay?" the man yelled over the roar of the storm.

"I need help," she said.

They were the first words she'd spoken in days, her voice raspy and dry. The rain, she finally noticed, tasted wonderful.

The man walked closer, recognized her. "Good God. The whole state's been looking for you." He took her under his arm and led her to the car,

carefully seating her in the front passenger seat.

“Go!” she said. “He’s coming, I know it.”

The man raced around to the other side, shifting the car into drive before his door was closed. He dialed 911 as he sped along Highway 57.

“Where’s your friend?” he asked.

The girl looked at him. “Who?”

“Nicole Cutty. The other girl who was taken.”

The Book Tour

Twelve Months Later

New York
September 2017
8:32 a.m.

Megan McDonald sat spine-straight in the chair and watched Dante Campbell read through interview notes without a hitch while a stylist dabbed her nose with a powdered brush, and general chaos occurred around her as producers shouted orders and lighting changes and the time remaining in commercial break. The shoulder shrugs and the deep breaths had done nothing useful, and had actually caused a knot to form in her trapezius, which was starting to spasm. Megan startled, a quick flinch, when a different makeup artist touched her cheek with a brush.

“Sorry, sweetheart. You’re too shiny. Close.”

Megan closed her eyes while the woman ran a brush over her face. A voice off in the darkness, beyond the television cameras, began counting down. Her mouth went cotton-dry and a noticeable tremor took control of her hands. The makeup people melted away and suddenly it was just Megan sitting in the bright lights across from Dante Campbell.

“Five, four, three, two . . . you’re live,”

Megan stuffed her shaking hands under her thighs. Dante Campbell stared into the camera and spoke in the practiced pitch and varied cadence perfected by morning-show hosts, among which her show was the top rated.

“We all know the harrowing story of Megan McDonald. The all-American girl, daughter of Emerson Bay’s sheriff, who was abducted in the summer of 2016. One year later, Megan is out now with her book, *Missing*, the true-story account of her abduction and courageous escape.” Dante Campbell pulled her gaze from the camera and smiled at her guest. “Megan, welcome to the show.”

Megan took a hard swallow of dry nothingness that nearly made her choke. “Thank you,” she said.

“The country and, of course, Emerson Bay has wanted to hear your story for more than a year. What inspired you to finally share it?”

Since booking this interview, Megan struggled with the answers she would give. She couldn't tell the great Dante Campbell the truth—that writing the book was the simplest way to tame her mother's sorrow and buy some breathing room. It was a way to get her mother, neurotic with worry and angst, off her back for a few months.

"It was just time," Megan said, deciding finally on the answers that would best get her out of the bright lights. "I needed to process everything before I was ready to tell people about it. I've had a chance to do that, and now I'm ready to tell my story."

"Time to process and to *heal*, I'm sure," Dante Campbell added.

Of course, Megan thought. Because, after all, it had been a whole *year*, and certainly such a time frame was sufficient to heal. Surely, a full year would make her complete again. Because, if Megan didn't come across as healed and happy and recovered, Dante Campbell—queen of morning television—would look wicked while drilling her for details. *Please*, Megan thought, *tell your audience again how mended and restored I am*.

"That too, yes," Megan said.

"I'm sure something like this takes a long time to get over, and in some ways documenting the events in your book was therapeutic."

Megan stopped herself from rolling her eyes. She had many adjectives to describe the process that created her book. *Therapeutic* was not one of them.

"It was." Megan smiled with her lips pressed together. It was her new smile, the best she could do and so different from the beaming pictures she saw the other day when she paged through her senior yearbook. Back then, her smile was wide, with straight, bright teeth filling the space between her curved lips. She tried at first, but it was too hard to fake that big smile so she came up with this new one. Lips together, edges turned up. Happy. People were buying it.

"What can people expect from reading your book?"

Megan wasn't completely sure, since she hadn't written much of it—that distinction went to her shrink, who snagged a byline on the cover.

"It, uh, you know, covers the night it happened."

"The night you were abducted," Dante clarified.

"Yes. And the two weeks I spent in captivity. A lot of it is stuff in my head that I thought about while being held. About where I was kept, and all my failed attempts to get away. And then about the night I, you know, ran out of the forest."

"The night you escaped."

Megan hesitated. "Yes. The book documents my escape." The thin