

# TAMI HOAG

## DOWN THE DARKEST ROAD



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# 1

*Once upon a time I had the perfect family. I had the perfect husband: handsome, loving, successful. I had the perfect children: Leslie and Leah—beautiful, brilliant, precious girls. I had the perfect life in the perfect home, in the perfect place. We were one of those sickeningly perfect families with matching monograms. The Lawtons: Lance, Lauren, Leslie, and Leah. The Lawtons of Santa Barbara, California.*

*And then, as in all fairy tales, evil came into our lives and destroyed us.*

*I remember when Leslie was small and loved to have us read to her. Fairy tales were the obvious choice. Our parents had read fairy tales to us when we were children. I remembered the books as being filled with beautiful pictures and happy endings. But fairy tales aren't happy stories. Only from a distance are they beautiful. In reality they are dark tales of abuse, neglect, violence, and murder.*

*Cinderella is held as a prisoner and treated as a slave in her own family home, abandoned by the death of her father to the physical and psychological torment of her stepmother and stepsisters.*

TAMI HOAG

*Hansel and Gretel are abducted by a sadistic maniac who holds them captive in the woods, fattening them with the intent of roasting them alive and cannibalizing them.*

*Red Riding Hood goes into the forest to visit her elderly grandmother only to find the woman has been savaged and eaten alive by a wild animal.*

*These are fairy tales.*

*So is my story.*

*Leslie was—is—our firstborn. Headstrong and charming, a little rebellious. She loved to dance, she loved music.*

*Loves music.*

*Who would ever think a person could be tormented by the choice of verb tense? Past? Present? A choice of little consequence to most people, that choice can bring me to tears, to the point of collapse, to the brink of suicide.*

*Leslie was. Leslie is. The difference to me is literally one of life or death.*

*Leslie is alive.*

*Leslie was my daughter.*

*My daughter went missing May 28, 1986. Four years have passed. She has not been seen or heard from. I don't know if she is alive or dead, if she is or was.*

*If I settle on the past tense, I admit my child is gone forever. If I grasp on to the present tense, I subject myself to the endless torment of hope.*

*I live in limbo. It's not a pleasant neighborhood. I would give anything to move out, or at least to remove the pall of it from my soul.*

*I crave some kind of cleansing, some kind of catharsis, an elimination of the toxic waste left behind in the wake of a bad experi-*

DOWN THE DARKEST ROAD

*ence. The idea of catharsis sparked me to begin this book. The idea—that by sharing my experience with the world, the poison of these memories might somehow be diluted—was like throwing a lifeline to someone being swept away by the raging waters of a flood.*

*The catch, however, is that I can't escape the torrent no matter how strong that lifeline might be. I am the mother of a missing child.*

\* \* \*

Writing just that much had exhausted Lauren. It had taken six hours to finish three pages, feeling as if she had to pluck and pull each word from the thick black tar of her emotions. She felt as if she had run a marathon and now needed to strip off her sweaty clothes and shower off the road grime. She saved her work, such as it was, to a floppy disk and shut down the computer.

She and her younger daughter, Leah, had moved to Oak Knoll more than a month past. It had taken her that long to stop procrastinating and sit down in front of the computer. And still a part of her had risen up in panic, screaming that it was too soon, that she wasn't ready. Every day of her life was a constant struggle within herself between the need to move forward and the fear of it, between sympathy for herself and disgust at her need for it.

The whole idea of this move was to retreat from the scene of all crimes in order to gain distance both literally and figuratively. And with distance perhaps would come some kind of perspective. She had the same hope for writing about what had happened: that through the telling of her story she would gain some kind of perspective and, if not peace, some kind of—what? Calm? Quiet? Ac-

TAMI HOAG

ceptance? None of those words really fit. They all seemed too much to hope for.

Bump and Sissy Bristol—old friends from Santa Barbara—had embraced her idea—both of the book and of the change of venue—and had offered the use of their second home in Oak Knoll as a refuge.

The Bristols were like family—like older siblings to Lance and Lauren, and godparents to the girls. Bump played the annual role of Santa Claus at Christmas and helped coach the girls' sport teams. Sissy was the fashion fairy godmother who delighted in taking the girls shopping and treating them to manicures and pedicures.

Bump's real name was Bob. He had earned his nickname decades ago for his aggressive style of play on the polo field—which was where he and Lance had become fast friends, despite a twelve-year age difference. As couples, they had run in some of the same social circles. Bump was in finance; Lance, an architect. They had numerous clients in common over the years. Sissy owned an antiques shop on Lillie Avenue in Summerland, south of Montecito. Lauren had a small business as a decorator.

Lance had designed the remodeling of the Bristols' Oak Knoll getaway in eighty-four. Lauren had kidded them about the project, even as she and Sissy worked on ideas for the interior. "You live in paradise. What's there to get away from?"

A beautiful picture-postcard town, Santa Barbara overlooked the Pacific Ocean, while mountains rose up behind it. Celebrities walked the streets there, ate in the trendy restaurants, had mansions in neighboring Montecito. Tourists flocked to the area every summer. There was never a shortage of things to do. The arts flourished there. It was a city of festivals and concerts.

DOWN THE DARKEST ROAD

Lauren had thrived in Santa Barbara. She and Lance had lived there for nearly twenty years—their entire married lives. Lance had grown up there. The girls had been born there. The Lawtons had been fixtures on the social scene, active in the schools.

Leslie had been abducted there.

Lance had died on a mountain road just north of town two years later.

Lauren couldn't go to the supermarket without being stared at, talked about. She had been a constant presence on the television news there and in the newspaper as she tried to keep her daughter's case in the public eye year after year. Every store owner in town knew her from the many times she had come by with a new poster for Leslie.

MISSING.

ABDUCTED.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?

People had cringed at meeting her, first because they didn't know what to say, then later because they didn't know how to get rid of her. Over the years they had grown tired of seeing her, of hearing about the case. They couldn't—didn't want to—sustain the sympathy or the guilt that went with it. Unsolicited advice had gone from “hang in there” to “time to move on.”

Even the best of friends had suggested the latter. “It's been so long, Lauren. Leslie is gone. You need to let go.”

Easy for them to say. Leslie wasn't their daughter.

Sissy and Bump had been kinder. They had offered the house, supporting her plan to get away from Santa Barbara for a while. Or maybe they had wanted rid of her too. Out of sight, out of mind.

Whatever their motive, Lauren was grateful.

TAMI HOAG

The house was located at the end of a dead-end road that reached out of town like a long finger pointing toward the purple hills to the west. It was a quiet, eclectic neighborhood. Most of the houses were older, and half-hidden from the road by overgrown bougainvillea and oleander bushes. The residents minded their own business. They had their own things going on. They lived on that street at least in part for the privacy.

A metal artist lived in a bungalow two houses down on the left with a front yard full of junk. An old hippie couple across the street from him had a huge vegetable garden and a clothesline full of tie-dyed T-shirts. Lauren's nearest neighbor was a retired teacher from McAster College who liked to leave his windows open and played a lot of classical chamber music that drifted up the road on the cool evening breeze.

The Bristols' house was the end of the line, a place designed for rest and peace. Behind the house, an open field of golden grass rambled down a little hill to an arroyo trimmed with a fringe of green trees. Beyond that rose the bony-backed range that separated the valley from the Santa Barbara vineyards and the coast. Lauren sometimes thought of the mountains as a wall, a wall that could hold the memories of the past few years away from her.

Or so she wished.

Tired of thinking, she left the second-floor study and went down the hall to the master suite to take a shower.

Bump and Sissy had spared no expense in the renovation of the house. In fact, there was little of the original house to be found, the job had been so extensive.

Lance had taken the unimaginative white clapboard box and transformed it for them into a whimsical California take on a New

England Cape Cod style. Wings and additions had been attached in such a way to suggest the house had grown over the course of time. Four en suite bedrooms in one wing housed the Bristols' grown children and grandchildren during vacations and holidays. The dining room accommodated a huge antique table that could seat a dozen friends for dinner.

The rooms rambled one to another, each overflowing with the treasures Sissy and Lauren had ferreted out together at flea markets and estate sales. The floors were done in wide, dark-stained reclaimed boards shipped in from the East Coast. The fireplaces in the living room and great room were made of river rock that might have come from the creek that ran behind the property.

In contrast to the rustic touches, the master bathroom was done in Carrara marble with fresh white beadboard cabinetry and pale blue walls. Lauren and Sissy had worked together to make the room into a sanctuary, a place to soak in the deep tub, have a glass of wine, read a book.

Lauren felt too tense to relax in the bath. If she started to drink this early in the afternoon, she would never make it to the supermarket to pick up something for dinner. She hadn't read a book for pleasure in years. The idea of pleasure made her feel guilty.

She showered quickly, hating touching her own body. She had always been lean and athletic. Now she was so thin she could read her ribs through her skin with her fingertips, like a blind person reading Braille. And yet she could hardly bring herself to eat. The idea of a real meal made her nauseous. She lived on protein bars and sports drinks. As soon as she was out of the shower, she pulled on a thick robe and closed it up to her chin.

She was forty-two years old, in the prime of her life. But the

TAMI HOAG

face that looked back at her from the mirror appeared so much older to her. Her skin was sallow, and lines flanked her mouth like a pair of parentheses. Gray streaked her once-black hair. She ran a comb through it and briefly considered having it colored. The thought was dismissed.

She didn't deserve to look good. She didn't deserve to take time for herself. At any rate, she had earned every one of those gray strands. She wore them with a certain amount of perverse pride.

Before Leslie had gone missing, Lauren had shown as much vanity as any average woman her age. She had liked to shop, always had the latest fashions. Now she pulled on jeans and a black T-shirt that was too big for her, slicked her hair back into a ponytail, and left the house in a pair of big sunglasses and no makeup.

With a population of around thirty thousand, Oak Knoll was what Lauren thought of as a "boutique town." Picturesque, charming, affluent. Not too big, not too small. The downtown was built around a pedestrian plaza studded with oak trees and lined on both sides with hip coffee shops, bookstores, art galleries, and restaurants. To the south and west of the plaza were the college and the beautiful old neighborhoods that surrounded it.

Sissy Bristol had graduated from McAster in the sixties. One of the most prestigious private schools in the country, McAster was especially renowned for its music program. And it was that mix of the academic and the artistic communities that had drawn her back to Oak Knoll when she and Bump had decided on a country house.

Located about an hour's drive inland from Santa Barbara, and an hour and a half north and west of Los Angeles, Oak Knoll at-

tracted well-educated retirees with disposable incomes and young professionals from the northernmost suburbs looking for a quiet, safe place to raise their families.

The result was a healthy economy, an entrepreneurial spirit, excellent services and schools.

Even the grocery stores were upscale. Lauren parked in the freshly blacktopped lot of the new Pavilions market with its stacked stone pillars and tinted windows. She grabbed a cart and wheeled it inside, where a staggering array of fresh floral displays greeted and tempted customers.

Clever marketing. Begin with a bouquet, set a beautiful table, buy a bottle of wine. Why cook? Select something gourmet-prepared in the deli section.

Lauren succumbed happily. An orzo salad. Poached salmon with dill. A fresh fruit tart from the bakery.

Leah had recently decided to become a vegetarian, but Lauren insisted she at least keep fish and eggs in her diet for the protein. In turn, Leah had made Lauren promise to eat bread every night at dinner because she worried her mother was too thin. A fresh round loaf of sourdough went in the cart.

Dinner was their declared peacetime. Nearing sixteen, Leah had not been in favor of the move to Oak Knoll. She was angry about leaving her friends and felt as if her mother hadn't taken her feelings into account, which wasn't true.

Lauren had taken into account the fact that in Santa Barbara her youngest would always be looked on as the sister of an abducted child. She would always be the surviving child of a tragic family. *Poor girl. What a shame.* The taint of pity for what had happened would be a part of everything she ever did or achieved.

TAMI HOAG

Those were Lauren's admitted thoughts/reasons/excuses for uprooting her youngest and bringing her here. That this year Leah would turn sixteen—the same age Leslie had been when she was taken—was also a reason was something she kept to herself.

She had read somewhere that sick minds were drawn to significant dates—anniversaries of their past crimes, for instance. The milestone birthday of a victim's sister didn't seem like a stretch for the kind of man who had taken Leslie. There would be some kind of sick thrill in it.

Did he know when Leah's birthday was? Had he seen her on the news after he had taken Leslie, and the family had been in the media spotlight? Leah's age had been mentioned in the newspapers. Journalists filled column inches with details like that.

*Santa Barbara architect Lance Lawton, 39 . . . his wife, Lauren, 38 . . . a younger daughter, 12 years old . . .*

Of course he had watched it all unfold on the news, in the papers. Four years had passed since he had taken Leslie. Had he kept tabs on them? Lauren was sure that he had. Did he know they had moved to Oak Knoll? Could he be here now? In this store?

He had stalked Leslie with no one knowing. He had taken her and had gotten away with it. He had stalked the family after the abduction. No one had been able to catch him at it. Why wouldn't he do it again?

They knew who he was. The police, the sheriff's department—they knew with ninety-percent certainty who he was. Lauren knew. She believed it with everything in her. But there was no evidence to prove it. They had nothing but conjecture and supposition. It was as if her daughter had been taken by an evil magician who had waved a wand and made her disappear. He walked around free, without consequence. Lauren was the one in prison.

DOWN THE DARKEST ROAD

What if he came back into their lives? What if he decided he wanted Leah?

A fist of fear pushed its way up her throat. The sensation of being watched crawled up the back of her neck. She turned quickly and looked behind her.

A stock boy was stacking boxes of crackers on a display. He glanced at her.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

Lauren swallowed and found her voice. “No. Thank you.”

She turned at the end of the aisle and caught a glimpse of a man with shoulder-length dark hair turning two aisles down. Her breath caught. Her heart jumped. A million thoughts shot through her brain like machine gun fire as she turned down the next aisle and hurried to the end of it.

*Is it him?*

*What will I do?*

*Will I scream?*

*Will people come running?*

*What will I say to them?*

She took a left and another left, and ran her cart headlong into his.

The man jumped back with a cry. “What the hell?”

Lauren stared at him, speechless.

The narrow face and hooded dark eyes—

*No. Oh, no.*

This man was stocky and Hispanic with a wide jaw. He wore a mustache. His hair was short.

“Are you all right?” he asked, coming around the cart.

“Is everything all right?” someone else asked.

Their voices seemed to come from the end of a tunnel.

TAMI HOAG

“I’m so sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Her own voice seemed to come from the end of the same tunnel. Her hands felt numb on the handle of the shopping cart. Her legs felt like water.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

The store manager loomed over her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, hyperventilating. She was sweating and cold at the same time. “I wasn’t looking where I was going. I’m so sorry. Do you have a ladies’ room?”

“In customer service.”

Before he could say anything more, she grabbed her purse out of the cart and hurried past him. In the restroom she went into a stall and sat on the toilet with her bag in her lap, trembling, blinking back tears, trying to calm her breathing. Her heart was pounding. She felt light-headed. She thought she might get sick to her stomach.

What had she been thinking?

Had she really seen him? Had she imagined him? Was he in the store? Had she simply turned down the wrong aisle?

What would she have done if the man she hit head-on with her grocery cart had turned out to be the man she believed had stolen her daughter? Would she have screamed? Would she have attacked him? Would the police have come and taken her away?

No answers came as she sat there listening to the piped-in music.

The bathroom door swung open and a woman’s voice called out. “Ma’am? The manager sent me in. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

She waited for the woman to leave, then let herself out of the

stall and left the store. Her hands were trembling as she dug her car keys out of her purse. It was all she could do to keep from running to the car.

She felt like a fool. Dinner was forgotten. She started the engine and sat there letting the air-conditioning blow on her to cool the flush of embarrassment from her skin.

Outside, the world was going on. People walked by, went into the store, came out of the store. They didn't look at her. They didn't know what she'd done ten minutes ago. They didn't know what she'd gone through four years ago, and every year since—*every day since*. They didn't care. Her life did not touch theirs.

*Pull it together, Lauren.*

She did a good job of it for the most part. The average person looking at her would never have suspected she lived on the ragged edge of sanity much of the time. Just as the average person would never have looked at their neighbor and suspected his thoughts were full of dark desires of kidnapping, torture, murder . . .

*He was such a quiet guy . . .*

Watching the people of Oak Knoll go on about their business mesmerized her after a while, like watching ants come and go from an anthill. She turned her thoughts back to the fact that she still had to do something about dinner.

She couldn't bring herself to go back into Pavilions. Ralphs market was just a few blocks away. Or maybe it would be wiser to simply call for a pizza or something. Retreat, regroup, have a drink or two, put this afternoon behind her. Maybe tomorrow she would be able to go out in public without attacking someone with a shopping cart.

She took a big deep breath and let it out with the idea of clear-

TAMI HOAG

ing her head. As she tried to let go the last of the tension, a van drove slowly past her. An unremarkable brown panel van. The driver turned his head and looked directly at her, and Lauren's heart stopped as she met the hooded dark eyes of Roland Ballen-coa.

The man who had taken her daughter.