‘If you only read one thriller this year, make it this one. It’s sensational’
CLARE MACKINTOSH

‘I loved this book’
LEE CHILD

THE MARSH KING’S DAUGHTER

If you were raised in total isolation . . .
would you know anything was wrong?

KAREN DIONNE

From its nest high on the roof of the Viking's castle, the stork could see a small lake, and by the reeds and the green banks lay the trunk of an alder tree. Upon this three swans stood flapping their wings and looking about them.

One of them threw off her plumage, and the stork recognized her as a princess of Egypt. There she sat without any covering but her long, black hair. The stork heard her tell the two others to take great care of the swan's plumage while she dipped down into the water to pluck the flowers she imagined she saw there.

The others nodded and picked up the feather dress and flew away with her swan's plumage. "Dive down now!" they cried; "thou shalt never more fly in the swan's plumage, thou shalt never again see Egypt; here, on the moor, thou wilt remain." So saying, they tore the swan's plumage into a thousand pieces. The feathers drifted about like a snow shower, and then the two deceitful princesses flew away.

The princess wept and lamented aloud; her tears moistened the alder stump, which was really not an alder stump but the Marsh King himself, he who in marshy ground lives and rules. The stump of the tree turned round, and was a tree no more, while long, clammy branches like arms extended from it.

The poor child was terribly frightened, and started up to run away. She hastened to cross the green, slimy ground, but quickly sank, and the alder stump after her. Great black bubbles rose up out of the slime, and with these, every trace of the princess vanished.

— Hans Christian Andersen,
The Marsh King's Daughter,
1872 translation by Mrs. H. B. Paull

Helena

If I told you my mother's name, you'd recognize it right away. My mother was famous, though she never wanted to be. Hers wasn't the kind of fame anyone would wish for. Jaycee Dugard, Amanda Berry, Elizabeth Smart—that kind of thing, though my mother was none of them.

You'd recognize my mother's name if I told it to you, and then you'd wonder—briefly, because the years when people cared about my mother are long gone, as she is—where is she now? And didn't she have a daughter while she was missing? And whatever happened to the little girl?

I could tell you that I was twelve and my mother twenty-eight when we were recovered from her captor, that I spent those years living in what the papers describe as a run-down farmhouse surrounded by swamp in the middle of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. That while I did learn to read thanks to a stack of *National Geographic* magazines from the 1950s and a yellowed edition of the collected poems of Robert Frost, I never went to school,

never rode a bicycle, never knew electricity or running water. That the only people I spoke to during those twelve years were my mother and father. That I didn't know we were captives until we were not.

I could tell you that my mother passed away two years ago, and while the news media covered her death, you probably missed it because she died during a news cycle heavy with more important stories. I can tell you what the papers did not: she never got over the years of captivity; she wasn't a pretty, articulate, outspoken champion of the cause; there were no book deals for my timid, self-effacing wreck of a mother, no cover of *Time*. My mother shrank from attention the way arrowroot leaves wither after a frost.

But I won't tell you my mother's name. Because this isn't her story. It's mine.

1

Wait here," I tell my three-year-old. I lean through the truck's open window to fish between her booster seat and the passenger door for the plastic sippy cup of lukewarm orange juice she threw in a fit of frustration. "Mommy will be right back."

Mari reaches for the cup like Pavlov's puppy. Her bottom lip pokes out and tears overflow. I get it. She's tired. So am I.

"Uh-uh-uh," Mari grunts as I start to walk away. She arches her back and pushes against the seat belt as if it's a straitjacket.

"Stay put, I'll be right back." I narrow my eyes and shake my finger so she knows I mean business and go around to the back of the truck. I wave at the kid stacking boxes on the loading dock by the delivery entrance to Markham's—Jason, I think is his name—then lower the tailgate to grab the first two boxes of my own.

"Hi, Mrs. Pelletier!" Jason returns my wave with twice the enthusiasm I gave him. I lift my hand again so we're even. I've given up telling him to call me Helena.

Bang-bang-bang from inside the truck. Mari is whacking her juice cup against the window ledge. I'm guessing it's empty. I bang the flat of my hand against the truck bed in response—*bang-bang-bang*—and Mari startles and twists around, her baby-fine hair whipping across her face like corn silk. I give her my best "cut it out if you know what's good for you" scowl, then heft the cartons to my shoulder. Stephen and I both have brown hair and eyes, as does our five-year-old, Iris, so he marveled over this rare golden child we created until I told him my mother was a blonde. That's all he knows.

Markham's is the next-to-last delivery of four, and the primary sales outlet for my jams and jellies, aside from the orders I pick up online. Tourists who shop at Markham's Grocery like the idea that my products are locally made. I'm told a lot of customers purchase several jars to take home as gifts and souvenirs. I tie gingham fabric circles over the lids with butcher's string and color-code them according to contents: red for raspberry jam, purple for elderberry, blue for blueberry, green for cattail-blueberry jelly, yellow for dandelion, pink for wild apple–chokecherry—you get the idea. I think the covers look silly, but people seem to like them. And if I'm going to get by in an area as economically depressed as the Upper Peninsula, I have to give people what they want. It's not rocket science.

There are a lot of wild foods I could use and a lot of different ways to fix them, but for now I'm sticking with jams and jellies. Every business needs a focus. My trademark is the cattail line drawing I put on every label. I'm pretty sure I'm the only person who mixes ground cattail root with blueberries to make jelly. I don't add much, just enough to justify including *cattail* in the name. When I was growing up, young cattail spikes were my

favorite vegetable. They still are. Every spring I toss my waders and a wicker basket in the back of my pickup and head for the marshes south of our place. Stephen and the girls won't touch them, but Stephen doesn't care if I cook them as long as I fix just enough for me. Boil the heads for a few minutes in salted water and you have one of the finest vegetables around. The texture is a little dry and mealy, so I eat mine with butter now, but of course, butter was nothing I'd tasted when I was a child.

Blueberries I pick in the logged-over areas south of our place. Some years the blueberry crop is better than others. Blueberries like a lot of sun. Indians used to set fire to the underbrush to improve the yield. I'll admit, I've been tempted. I'm not the only person out on the plains during blueberry season, so the areas closest to the old logging roads get picked over fairly quickly. But I don't mind going off the beaten path, and I never get lost. Once I was so far out in the middle of nowhere, a Department of Natural Resources helicopter spotted me and hailed me. After I convinced the officers I knew where I was and what I was doing, they left me alone.

"Hot enough for you?" Jason asks as he reaches down and takes the first box from my shoulder.

I grunt in response. There was a time when I would have had no idea how to answer such a question. My opinion of the weather isn't going to change it, so why should anyone care what I think? Now I know I don't have to, that this is an example of what Stephen calls "small talk," conversation for the sake of conversation, a space-filler not meant to communicate anything of importance or value. Which is how people who don't know each other well talk to each other. I'm still not sure how this is better than silence.

Jason laughs like I told the best joke he's heard all day, which Stephen also insists is an appropriate response, never mind that I didn't say anything funny. After I left the marsh, I really struggled with social conventions. Shake hands when you meet someone. Don't pick your nose. Go to the back of the line. Wait your turn. Raise your hand when you have a question in the classroom and then wait for the teacher to call on you before you ask it. Don't burp or pass gas in the presence of others. When you're a guest in someone's home, ask permission before you use the bathroom. Remember to wash your hands and flush the toilet after you do. I can't tell you how often I felt as though everyone knew the right way to do things but me. Who makes these rules, anyway? And why do I have to follow them? And what will be the consequences if I don't?

I leave the second box on the loading dock and go back to the truck for the third. Three cases, twenty-four jars each, seventy-two jars total, delivered every two weeks during June, July, and August. My profit on each case is $59.88, which means that over the course of the summer, I make more than a thousand dollars from Markham's alone. Not shabby at all.

And about my leaving Mari alone in the truck while I make my deliveries, I know what people would think if they knew. Especially about leaving her alone with the windows down. But I'm not about to leave the windows up. I'm parked under a pine and there's a breeze blowing off the bay, but the temperature has been pushing upper eighties all day, and I know how quickly a closed car can turn into an oven.

I also realize that someone could easily reach through the open window and grab Mari if they wanted to. But I made a decision years ago that I'm not going to raise my daughters to

fear that what happened to my mother might also happen to them.

One last word on this subject, and then I'm done. I guarantee if anyone has a problem with how I'm raising my daughters, then they've never lived in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. That's all.

Back at the truck, Mari the Escape Artist is nowhere to be seen. I go up to the passenger window and look inside. Mari is sitting on the floor chewing a cellophane candy wrapper she found under the seat as if it's a piece of gum. I open the door, fish the wrapper out of her mouth and shove it in my pocket, then dry my fingers on my jeans and buckle her in. A butterfly flutters through the window and lands on a spot of sticky something on the dash. Mari claps her hands and laughs. I grin. It's impossible not to. Mari's laugh is delicious, a full-throated, unselfconscious chortle I never get tired of hearing. Like those YouTube videos people post of babies laughing uncontrollably over inconsequential things like a jumping dog or a person tearing strips of paper—Mari's laugh is like that. Mari is sparkling water, golden sunshine, the chatter of wood ducks overhead.

I shoo the butterfly out and put the truck in gear. Iris's bus drops her off at our house at four forty-five. Stephen usually watches the girls while I make my deliveries, but he won't be back until late tonight because he's showing a new set of lighthouse prints to the gallery owner who sells his photographs in the Soo. Sault Ste. Marie, which is pronounced "Soo" and not "Salt," as people who don't know better often say, is the second-largest city in the Upper Peninsula. But that isn't saying much. The sister city on the Canadian side is a lot bigger. Locals on

both sides of the St. Mary's River call their city "The Soo." People come from all over the world to visit the Soo Locks to watch the giant iron-ore carriers pass through. They're a big tourist draw.

I deliver the last case of assorted jams to the Gitche Gumee Agate and History Museum gift shop, then drive to the lake and park. As soon as Mari sees the water, she starts flapping her arms. "Wa-wa, wa-wa." I know that at her age she should be speaking in complete sentences. We've been taking her to a developmental specialist in Marquette once a month for the past year, but so far this is the best she's got.

We spend the next hour on the beach. Mari sits beside me on the warm beach gravel, working off the discomfort of an erupting molar by chewing on a piece of driftwood I rinsed off for her in the water. The air is hot and still, the lake calm, the waves sloshing gently like water in a bathtub. After a while, we take off our sandals and wade into the water and splash each other to cool off. Lake Superior is the largest and deepest of the Great Lakes, so the water never gets warm. But on a day like today, who'd want it to?

I lean back on my elbows. The rocks are warm. As hot as it is today, it's hard to believe that when Stephen and I brought Iris and Mari to this same spot a couple of weeks ago to watch the Perseid meteor shower we needed sleeping bags and jackets. Stephen thought it was overkill when I packed them into the back of the Cherokee, but of course he had no idea how cold the beach gets after the sun goes down. The four of us squeezed inside a double sleeping bag and lay on our backs on the sand looking up. Iris counted twenty-three shooting stars and made a wish on every one, though Mari snoozed through most of the

show. We're going to come out again in a couple of weeks to check out the northern lights.

I sit up and check my watch. It's still difficult for me to be somewhere at an exact time. When a person is raised on the land as I was, the land dictates what you do and when. We never kept a clock. There was no reason to. We were as attuned to our environment as the birds, insects, and animals, driven by the same circadian rhythms. My memories are tied to the seasons. I can't always remember how old I was when a particular event took place, but I know what time of year it happened.

I know now that for most people, the calendar year begins on January 1. But in the marsh there was nothing about January to distinguish it from December or February or March. Our year began in the spring, on the first day the marsh marigolds bloomed. Marsh marigolds are huge bushy plants two feet or more in diameter, each covered with hundreds of inch-wide bright yellow blossoms. Other flowers bloom in the spring, like the blue flag iris and the flowering heads of the grasses, but marsh marigolds are so prolific that nothing compares to that astonishing yellow carpet. Every year my father would pull on his waders and go out into the marsh and dig one up. He'd put it in an old galvanized tub half-filled with water and set it on our back porch, where it glowed like he'd brought us the sun.

I used to wish my name was Marigold. But I'm stuck with Helena, which I often have to explain is pronounced "Hel-LAY-nuh." Like a lot of things, it was my father's choice.

The sky takes on a late afternoon quality that warns it's time to go. I check the time and see to my horror that my internal

clock has not kept pace with my watch. I scoop up Mari and grab our sandals and run back to the truck. Mari squalls as I buckle her in. I'm not unsympathetic. I would have liked to stay longer, too. I hurry around to the driver's side and turn the key. The dashboard clock reads 4:37. I might make it. Just.

I peel out of the parking lot and drive south on M-77 as fast as I dare. There aren't a lot of police cars in the area, but for the officers who patrol this route, aside from ticketing speeders, there isn't much to do. I can appreciate the irony of my situation. I'm speeding because I'm late. Getting stopped for speeding will make me later still.

Mari works herself into a full-on tantrum as I drive. She kicks her feet, sand flies all over the truck, the sippy cup bounces off the windshield, and snot runs out her nose. Miss Marigold Pelletier is most definitely not a happy camper. At the moment, neither am I.

I tune the radio to the public broadcasting station out of Northern Michigan University in Marquette, hoping for music to distract her—or drown her out. I'm not a fan of classical, but this is the only station that comes in clearly.

Instead, I pick up a news alert: *"—escaped prisoner . . . child abductor . . . Marquette . . ."*

"Be quiet," I yell, and turn the volume up.

"Seney National Wildlife Refuge . . . armed and dangerous . . . do not approach." At first, that's all I manage to catch.

I need to hear this. The refuge is less than thirty miles from our house. "Mari, stop!"

Mari blinks into silence. The report repeats:

"Once again, state police report that a prisoner serving life without parole for child abduction, rape, and murder has es-

caped from the maximum security prison in Marquette, Michigan. The prisoner is believed to have killed two guards during a prison transfer and escaped into the Seney National Wildlife Refuge south of M-28. Listeners should consider the prisoner armed and dangerous. Do NOT, repeat, DO NOT approach. If you see anything suspicious, call law enforcement immediately. The prisoner, Jacob Holbrook, was convicted of kidnapping a young girl and keeping her captive for more than fourteen years in a notorious case that received nationwide attention . . ."

My heart stops. I can't see. Can't breathe. Can't hear anything over the blood rushing in my ears. I slow the truck and pull carefully onto the shoulder. My hand shakes as I reach to turn the radio off.

Jacob Holbrook has escaped from prison. The Marsh King. My father.

And I'm the one who put him in prison in the first place.