

THE CROSSING

B. MICHAEL RADBURN



A note from the publisher

Dear Reader,

If you enjoy gripping stories with engaging characters and strong writing, as I do, you'll love B. Michael Radburn's *The Crossing*. It's a heart-stopping, brooding crime novel set in a dying town full of dark history: a desperate search for a missing child, mystery, murders, and a supernatural twist. He had me hooked from the very first page, and I couldn't put the story down.

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Please enjoy *The Crossing*.

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Happy reading,

Alison Green



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For Iris

PROLOGUE

Taylor woke suddenly, his face beaded with sweat, his lips trembling as he drew a deep, unsteady breath. Although the blinds were drawn, he knew it was daylight outside. Already after 1 p.m. according to the bedside clock radio. He reached out to Maggie's side of the bed ... still empty since she had started sleeping in the spare room. At least they still shared the same house.

Sweeping back the doona, he sat up on the edge of the bed, his singlet and pants damp. As his eyes adjusted, they were drawn to the rose patterns on the doona, the splash of red on white reminding him of the last time he saw Claire ...

The phone began to ring in the kitchen on the far side of the apartment. Taylor heard Maggie's footsteps on the timber floor, heard her muffled voice from down the hall as she answered it. He rubbed his stubble, three days' worth, aware of the stale taste lingering in his mouth. He needed to clean up, needed to brush his teeth and shave. But as soon as he

stood, the sharp pain in his legs sent him falling backward onto the bed.

Claire's gone!

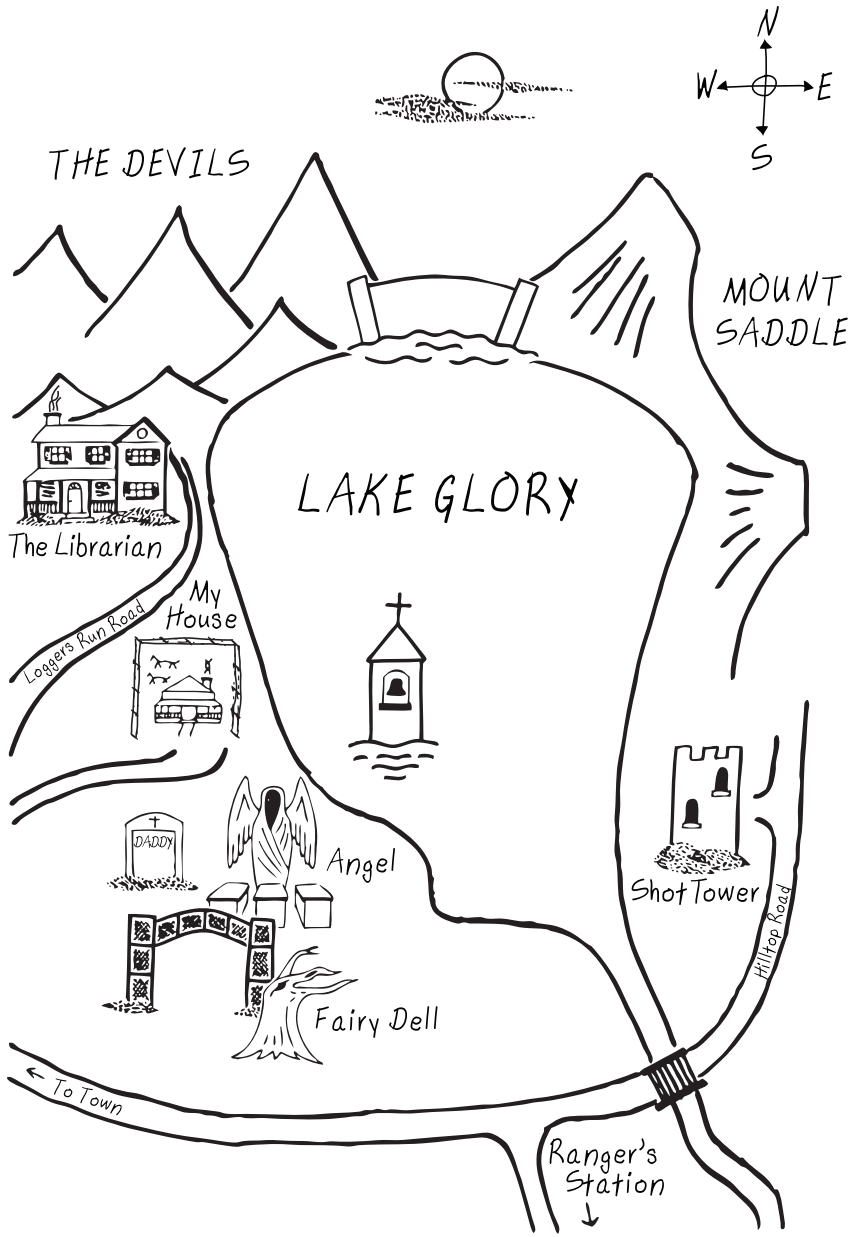
As he rose again, slowly, unsteadily, a flood of daylight entered the room as the door was opened. He raised his hand to shield his eyes and, squinting, made out Maggie's silhouette in the doorway.

She was holding the phone out towards him. 'It's Brian Ross from Parks & Wildlife.' As she switched on the lights, he fell back down on the edge of the bed. She stood next to him, her honey-blond hair, so much like Claire's, was tied back in a ponytail. Her face, devoid of makeup, was strained. 'Brian says there's an opening on the Island ... Tasmania.' She said it as if she didn't care.

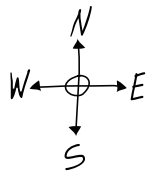
Reaching for the phone, he saw his hands were shaking. 'Tasmania ... I ... I'm not sure I ... '

'Just talk to him,' she said and slowly turned towards the door. Before closing it she added, 'You know that if you go there, you go alone.'

As she closed the door, he whispered, 'I know.'



THE DEVILS



MOUNT SADDLE

LAKE GLORY



The Librarian

Loggers Run Road

My House



DADDY



Angel



Fairy Dell



Shot Tower

Hilltop Road

To Town

Ranger's Station

1

Ben Lomond National Park, Tasmania.

The nights were worse. By far. Taylor could feel the darkness pressing in against the cottage's small bedroom window. The solid sandstone walls remained sturdy against the weather, but the old shingled roof was not so forgiving, cold draughts finding their way through the crawlspace. Convict-built, it was owned by Parks & Wildlife as lodging for their rangers. Taylor had made it his home over the past ten months or so, but had contributed few changes to it. There was a bedroom, a spare room with his few things still in boxes, and a laundry and bathroom at the end of the hall with a wood-chip heater for hot water. The remaining room served as the kitchen, dining room and sitting room all in one, its large cast-iron cooker and open fireplace being Taylor's main sources of heat through his first winter here. The cottage needed a lot of labour to run and maintain, but any distractions were a

godsend to Taylor, particularly on nights like this. Nights when he couldn't sleep; nights when he was afraid to sleep. If it wasn't the dreams, then it was the sleepwalking. He sighed deeply, drawing in the night with every ounce of oxygen.

Taylor found nothing between himself and the night but the window's glass. It was the utter darkness that sat across the land before dawn's light. There was a thin layer of snow on the sandstone sill outside. He looked at his watch, the fluorescent face a pale glow, barely bright enough to read. It was four o'clock. His body had become so accursed, his broken life no longer measured in days, as days and nights now just drifted in and out within a sleepless haze. There was no black and white anymore, just an endless grey with no horizon.

The same full moon that had glided between patches of snow clouds all night was now somewhere behind Mount Saddle in the northeast, the mountain named for its resemblance to a stockman's saddle. Breaking the silence, a Tasmanian devil cried out from across the lake. Taylor wondered if he could ever get used to that sound. He sighed again, noticing that the windowpane had fogged from his breath. With a sense of sadness, he reached forward and wrote a name in the condensation. Claire.

It was the first snow Taylor had seen since his transfer to Tasmania, and he didn't much care for it. After seven years on the mainland with National Parks & Wildlife, he'd spent the last three in the snowfields and high country of Victoria. It was a dream job for any ranger, but that was before losing

Claire. She was eight years old then. It was a year ago to the day. Taylor clenched his jaw as something trembled deep within him. Something more than grief. Something more than heartache, like a treasured memory dying.

Life can turn on a penny, his father used to say.

‘Amen, Dad,’ Taylor whispered, the sound of his voice loud in the silent cottage.

Where once there had been a wife, child, career and happiness, there was now only career and that was waning. When Claire went missing last winter, it was as if the threads binding the rest of his life together simply unravelled. Marriage was easy when times were good. Easy for all. But there are no lessons for life’s tragedies. Even a fine woman can seek solitude in times of grief. Even a good marriage can come undone. Taylor missed them both dearly. His wife, Maggie, now sleeping in Port Bradley on the Victorian mainland, and his daughter Claire ...

Taylor winced at the night-cry of another devil. Clutching his hands together, he found himself studying them in the dim light, suddenly realising he didn’t recognise them anymore. They were the same hands that once caressed his wife’s body, the same hands that held his newborn child, yet he didn’t know them. He held them up close to his face. They seemed much older, much weaker. Hell, he didn’t recognise himself anymore. More than anything, he just wanted things to be the way they were. But that wasn’t possible, not without Claire. His love for his family was so strong it hurt.

So what are you doing down here alone on this rock? he asked himself. It wasn't the first time he asked that question since Claire's disappearance, and he still couldn't answer it. Maybe the day he could would be the day he'd go home.

Yeah, home, he thought. Even the word seemed distant.

Taylor stepped away from the window, desperate for dawn's light to appear, for the sun's warmth to touch his face. After all, it was only the promise of day that made the nights bearable. His ankle ached from when he twisted it while sleepwalking a few hours earlier. The episodes were growing more frequent, the walks longer, taking him further, leaving him more and more weary each day. And always a part of the dreams, always looking for Claire. In his dreams he saw her in the red parka she wore the day she disappeared in the snow. Closing his eyes, he could still see her red form starkly contrasted against the white hills, moving away from him, leaving nothing but tracks in the snow and the warmth of her kiss on his cold cheek. Away forever.

He needed to talk.

He cried instead.

Restless, he moved around the cottage, turning every light on. Sitting, standing, pacing, the tears turning cold on his face. Finally composed, he returned to the bedroom and picked up the telephone by the bed to dial Maggie's number. There was no point in trying his mobile because there was no reception anywhere in the basin, not until well up in the higher country or out on the highway. But Taylor appreciated the solitude this

maintained, a way of shielding himself against any unwanted calls. Anyone calling on the cottage phone was either Parks & Wildlife checking on him, or the few others he'd given the number to. Like Maggie.

The phone was an old black Bakelite from the fifties, the numbers on its dial almost illegible, its mouthpiece smelling of stale tobacco. Everything in the ranger's cottage was old, the musty scent of generations in every corner. It made him wonder what he would contribute to the smells and textures after he was gone. His footprint there was minimal, his past taped up in the boxes stored in the spare room where they'd probably remain. Taylor checked his watch again, beginning to feel guilty at calling Maggie so early in the morning. He counted the tones and tried to picture her apartment at Port Bradley. He could imagine the sound bouncing off the rendered walls, sense a stirring from Maggie's neighbours as they rolled over and looked at their alarm clocks, swearing under their breaths at the early morning intrusion resonating through the drywall. It seemed to ring forever. Disappointed, he hung up and lay down on the bed.

Just as his head touched the pillow, the phone began to ring. It had an odd sound, like a phone in an old movie. He rolled over and picked up.

'Hello,' he said. There was a note of desperation in his voice, something he hadn't anticipated. Please be Maggie.

The person on the other end finished yawning. 'Taylor?'

Maggie's voice filled him with both a sense of relief for its familiarity, and a sense of dread at not wanting to disappoint her. Don't fuck this up, he reminded himself.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Hi, Maggie.'

'Hi,' she said sleepily. 'Did you just call?'

'Uh-huh,' he said, then quickly added, 'Sorry. I didn't realise the time.' It was a lie.

'It's okay,' she said. Her voice was sympathetic. 'I've been expecting your call.' She hesitated before adding, 'Maybe not this early, but I did expect it.'

'Sorry,' he said again.

She sighed. 'A year today.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I didn't think I'd make it.'

Maggie didn't say anything.

'How are *you*?' Taylor asked.

'Oh,' she said. 'I think of her a lot. Especially today.'

'Do ...' Taylor stumbled over his words, but he had to get them out. 'Do you ever *see* her, Maggie?'

'Claire?'

'Yeah,' he said, glad to have asked the question. 'I mean, do you ever think you see her? You know, a flick of the hair. The way she walked. Her smile. Do you ever see her from the corner of your eye, but when you look, it's just some other little girl with similar mannerisms?'

Maggie hesitated, and Taylor realised she wasn't entirely up to the conversation. What did you expect? he asked himself bitterly.

‘Taylor,’ she said, ‘you know I’m not like you. I don’t see her everywhere. I don’t hear her or dream about her, so please stop asking.’ The air of sympathy had a sharp edge. But that was Maggie. She was a hip-shooter, always had been. ‘It just makes me feel guilty,’ she said finally. ‘Claire’s gone and ...’ Her voice wavered as she fought back tears. ‘Claire’s gone. The laughter’s gone. The ... The family’s ...’

‘Gone.’ Taylor finished it for her. ‘I’m sorry, Maggie.’

‘You’re always sorry,’ she said. Her tone wasn’t sharp anymore, she was just stating a fact.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t find her. I’m sorry I took her out that day... I’m sorry our world has changed so much. I ... I’m sorry our love has gone.’ Taylor knew how pathetic he must sound and half expected Maggie to hang up. But she didn’t.

‘Oh, Taylor,’ she said softly. ‘The love hasn’t gone. It just can’t compete with the grief. We need to give it time.’

He stared out the window, desperate for first light.

Neither spoke for a while until Maggie broke the silence. ‘You need to get through the grief. That’s all. We both do.’

‘I need to find her,’ Taylor said. ‘I can’t cope. It’s ... unfinished.’

‘We cope any way we can.’ Maggie countered. ‘I do it by working sixteen-hour days. And you do it by moving to the end of the earth. What you really need is to find closure.’

‘I can’t find closure until I bring her home.’

‘Taylor, you don’t even know where home is anymore.’

‘I know she’s out there, Maggie.’

His eyes snapped open. ‘Claire?’ he whispered. But he was alone.

The floorboards protested as Taylor returned to the small window and waited for the dawn. Somewhere out in the darkness, he could sense the lake creeping closer.

