



Dayle Campbell Gaetz

DISAPPEARING ACT

*A Leena O'Neil
Mystery*

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Summary: In this murder mystery, Leena O’Neil, a young woman who is working to become a private investigator, works to clear her sister in her first case. (RL 4.2)

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*To my mom, who is nothing like
Leena O'Neil's mother and who never tried
to force me into law school.*

ONE

Anything to do with private investigations grabbed my interest. Always has. That's why I stood staring at a sink full of grungy dishes, waiting for an important interview on my radio. Should I start washing or sit down and take notes?

"How to disappear." A deep male voice broke into my thoughts. *"I spent twenty years as a private detective tracking down fugitives. I know every trick in the book."*

"And you've explained them all in your new book, Without a Trace," the female interviewer said with a laugh.

“I could write my own book,” I muttered, turning on the tap. “I’d call it *Disappearing for Dummies*.” Because seriously, if I could do it, anyone with half a brain could too.

“*It’s not easy,*” the detective said, contradicting me. “*You’ll spend the rest of your life glancing over your shoulder, hiding from all those people trying to track you down.*”

I glanced over my shoulder. No one peering through the window, no one lurking in the shadows.

“*People get caught because they get sloppy,*” the detective continued. “*They can’t let go of old habits, like eating sushi every Friday night, hanging out at the racetrack or collecting rare books. Change your lifestyle and they won’t know where to look.*”

“Or be like me—change nothing and no one bothers looking,” I said.

“*In my experience, most folks are relieved to get caught,*” he went on. “*They often thanked*

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me for finding them because they were so tired of running.”

“But if someone seriously wants to disappear?” the interviewer asked. “You know, because they’re being stalked or something? What advice do you have for them?”

“Okay. Number one. Plan ahead. Know exactly where you’re going, and take enough money to get there.”

“So,” I said to the radio. I wiped the countertop and dropped my damp sponge in the cluttered sink. Turned off the tap. “Three years ago I walked out the door with a backpack, a shoulder bag and sixty-seven dollars and twenty-three cents. How’s that for planning ahead?”

“Two. Set up a new identity ahead of time, so you can find a job, open a bank account, that sort of thing.”

I wandered over to the table. “I hitched a ride to the island, changed my name from

Colleen, which I hate, to Leena, which feels like me, and that's it. Kept my old bank account and got a job under my own name. How am I doing so far?"

"Three. Cut off all ties, ditch your smart-phone, get rid of your Facebook and Twitter accounts, wipe out your email addresses."

"At least we agree on something. I stopped using Facebook and changed my email address when I switched providers, but I kept my old phone. Because you never know, one day my family might try to find me."

So far, no one had reported me missing. But to be fair, they may not have noticed I was gone. Mother always said I was too quiet for my own good. Maybe she was right.

"Four," the detective continued. *"Never call your mother, girlfriend, sister or anyone else from a traceable phone. Never."*

"Okay. Got that covered." I knew what would happen if I called my mother. She'd

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put me on hold. Either that or ask me to call back later. Same for my sister. Been there. Done that.

My back pocket blared out a Rhino ringtone. I grabbed my phone on the second ring. Stared at the screen. *Gina!* Typical. I say my sister would never talk to me, and two seconds later she's proving me wrong. Gina was always the perfect one. The sister who could do no wrong, who was never too quiet. Gina was the smart one with the perfect career, the perfect husband, the perfect life. If Gina went missing, everyone would notice.

The phone rang again, shivering in my hand. My finger hovered over the screen. Push up to answer. Push down to decline. I dropped the phone on the table and sprinted over to the radio. Switched it off.

My phone rang a fourth and final time. I remained by the radio—tense, waiting. Finally, I sauntered back. Picked up the phone. Checked for voice messages.

“Colleen?” The voice sounded too uncertain to be Gina’s. My older sister was always confident. Always in charge. Never quite approving of me. Gina looked and acted so much like our mother, I used to tell my friends she was a clone. I never mentioned that I came from another planet, but for a while there, I believed it. Must have been all that science fiction I read before getting hooked on crime novels.

“Are you there?” the voice asked. “It’s me, Georgia.”

Georgia? Who the hell was Georgia?

“Your sister,” she added. “Georgina.”

My sister changed her name too?

After a pause she continued, so softly I strained to hear. The only word I caught was “Colleen” and it grated on my nerves. I had almost forgotten Colleen. The girl I never wanted to be. The girl I left home to escape.

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I shuffled to the window, folded my arms across my stomach and stared out at my garden. One lonesome lawn chair, maples turning golden on top while brilliant yellow chrysanthemums clustered at their feet. I thought of the chrysanthemums I'd planted in my mother's garden. Had anyone watered them? Were they blooming now too? Yellow chrysanthemums were my favorite autumn flower.

I replayed the message with the phone pressed tight to my ear. "*Please, Colleen, I need your help. Call me. Please.*" Her voice faded to nothing.

I sank onto the nearest chair. "So, you finally call me because you need help?" I asked aloud. "Please tell me why I should care."

Leaving my phone, I slammed out of the house. But her voice followed me down the long, winding driveway, sounding more desperate with every step. *I need your help. Call me. Please.*

I stopped. Turned around. Started back. I'd run away once, but never again. I wasn't a kid anymore. It was time to face up to my family, and the desperate tone of Gina's voice told me she really needed my help. I had to find out what was wrong. I threw open the door and grabbed the phone. It started ringing in my hand. "Gina?" I answered, my heart crashing into my lungs.

"Georgia," she corrected, uncompromising as always. "I'm catching the next ferry. Meet me. *Please*. Don't call again. Take the battery out of your phone."

"Why?" I asked. But she was gone.

DAYLE CAMPBELL GAETZ has worked as a creative writing instructor, book editor and columnist but now devotes her time to her own writing. Gaetz is the author of over twenty books for young people and adults. Her 2013 novel *Taking the Reins* won a Moonbeam Gold Award for historical fiction and a Willa Literary Award. Gaetz grew up in Victoria, British Columbia, enjoyed twenty-two years on Salt Spring Island and now lives in Campbell River.

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