

The Edge of the Water

Also by Elizabeth George

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The Edge of Nowhere

ELIZABETH GEORGE

The Edge of the Water



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For Gail Tsukiyama, beloved younger sister,
who said the word that gave me the story

I have done nothing but in care of thee,
Of thee my dear one, thee my daughter who
Art ignorant of what thou art . . .

William Shakespeare,
The Tempest

PART ONE
Deception Pass

Cilla's World

I was two years old when I came to my parents, but the only memories I have before the memories of them are like dreams. I'm carried. There's water nearby. I'm cold. Someone runs with me in his arms. My head is pressed so hard to his shoulder that it hurts every time he takes a step. And I know it's a *he*, by the way he's holding me. For holding doesn't come naturally to men.

It's nighttime and I remember lights. I remember voices. I remember shivering with fear and with wet. Then something warm is around me and my shivering stops and then I sleep.

After that, with another flash of a dream, I see myself in another place. A woman tells me she's Mommy now and she points to a man whose face looms over mine and he says that he's Daddy now. But they are not my parents and they never will be, just as the words they say are not my words and they never will be. That has been the source of my trouble.

I don't speak. I only walk and point and observe. I get along by doing what I am told. But I fear things that other children don't fear.

I fear water most of all, and this is a problem from the very start. For I live with the mommy and the daddy in a house that sits high above miles of water and from the windows of this place, water is all that I see. This makes me want to hide in the house, but a child can't do that when there is church to attend and school to enroll in as the child gets older.

I don't do those things. I try to do them, the mommy and the daddy try to make me do them, and other people try as well. But all of us fail.

This is why I end up far away, in a place where there is no water. There are people who poke me. They prod me. They talk over my head. They watch me on videos. They present me with pictures. They ask me questions. What I hear is "You have to *do* something with her, that's why we brought her" and the words mean nothing to me. But I recognize in the sound of the words a form of farewell.

So I remain in this no-water place, where I learn the rudiments that go for human life. I learn to clean and to feed myself. But that is the extent of what I learn. Give me a simple task and I can do it if I'm shown exactly what to do, and from this everyone begins to understand that there is nothing wrong with my memory. That, however, is all they understand. So they label me their mystery. It's a blessing, they say, that at least I can walk and feed and clean myself. That, they say, is cause for celebration.

So I'm finally returned to the mommy and the daddy. Someone declares, "You're eighteen years old now. Isn't that grand?" and although these words mean nothing to me, from them I understand things will be different. What's left, then, is a drive in the car on a January morning of bitter cold, a celebration picnic because I've come home.

We go to a park. We drive for what seems like a very long time to get to the place. We cross a high bridge and the mommy calls out, "Close your eyes, Cilla! There's water below!" I do what she says, and soon enough the bridge is behind us. We turn in among trees that soar into the sky and we follow a twisting road down and down and covered with the foliage of cedars shed in winter storms.

At the bottom of the road, there's a place for cars. There are picnic tables and the mommy says, "What a day for a

picnic! Have a look at the beach while I set up, Cilla. I know how you like to look at the beach.”

The daddy says, “Yep. Come on, Cill,” and when he trudges toward a thick growth of shiny-leafed bushes beneath the trees, I follow him to a path that cuts through it. Here is a trail, part sand and part dirt, where we pass beneath cedars and firs and we brush by ferns and boulders and at last we come to the beach.

I do not fear beaches, only the water that edges them. Beaches themselves I love with their salty scents and the thick, crawling serpents of seaweed that slither across them. Here there is driftwood worn smooth by the water. Here there are great boulders to climb. Here an eagle flies high in the air and a seagull caws and a dead salmon lies in the cold harsh sun.

I stop at this fish. I bend to inspect it. I bend closer to smell it. It makes my eyes sting.

The seagull caws again and the eagle cries. It swoops and soars and I follow its flight with my gaze. North it flies, and it disappears high beyond the trees.

I watch for its return, but the bird is gone. So is, I see, the daddy who led me down through the trees and onto this beach. He'd stopped where the sand met the trail through the woods. He'd said, “Think I'll have me a cancer stick. Don't tell Herself, huh, Cill?” but I have walked on. He has perhaps returned to the car for the promised picnic, and now I am alone. I don't like the alone or the nearness of the water. I hurry back to the spot where the car is parked.

But it, too, is gone, just like the daddy. So is the mommy. In the place where the picnic was supposed to be, only two things stand on the lichenous table beneath the trees. One is a sandwich wrapped in plastic. The other is a small suitcase with wheels.

I approach these objects. I look around. I see, I observe, I point as always. But there is no one in this place to respond to me.

I am here, wherever this is, alone.

I

When people said “Money isn’t everything,” Jenn McDaniels knew two things about them. First, they’d never been poor. Second, they didn’t have a clue what being poor was like. Jenn was poor, she’d been poor for all of her fifteen years, and she had a whole lot more than just a clue about the kinds of things you had to do when you didn’t have money. You bought your clothes at thrift stores, you put together meals from food banks, and when something came along that meant you had even the tiniest chance of escaping bedsheets for curtains and a life of secondhand everything, you did what it took.

That was what she was up to on the afternoon that Annie Taylor drove into her life. Had the condition of the very nice silver Honda Accord not told Jenn that Annie Taylor didn’t belong on Whidbey Island – for God’s sake the car was actually clean! – the Florida plates would have done the job. As would have Annie Taylor’s trendy clothes and her seriously fashionable spiky red hair. She got out of the Accord, put one hand on her hip, said to Jenn, “This is Possession Point, right?” and frowned at the obstacle course that Jenn had set up the length of the driveway.

This obstacle course was Jenn’s tiniest chance to escape the bedsheet curtains and the secondhand everything. It was also her chance to escape Whidbey Island altogether. The course consisted of trash can lids, broken toilet seats, bait buckets, floats, and ripped-up life jackets, all of which

stood in for the traffic cones that any other kid – like a kid with money – might have used for a practice session. Her intention had been one hour minimum of dribbling up and down this obstacle course. Tryouts for the All Island Girls' Soccer team were coming up in a few months, and Jenn was *going* to make the team. Center midfielder! A blazing babe with amazing speed! Her dexterity unquestioned! Her future assured! University scholarship, here I come . . . Only at the moment, Annie Taylor's car was in the way. Or Jenn was in Annie's way, depending on how you looked at things.

Jenn said yeah, this was Possession Point, and she made no move to clear the way so that Annie could drive forward. Frankly, she saw no reason to. The redhead clearly didn't belong here, and if she wanted to look at the view – such as it was, which wasn't much – then she was going to have to take her butt down to the water on foot.

Jenn dribbled the soccer ball toward a broken toilet seat lid, dodging and feinting. She did a bit of clever whipping around to fool her opponents. She was ready to move the ball past a trash can lid when Annie Taylor called out, "Hey! Sorry? C'n you tell me . . . I'm looking for Bruce McDaniels."

Jenn halted and looked over her shoulder. Annie added, "D'you know him? He's supposed to live here. He's got a key for me. I'm Annie Taylor, by the way."

Jenn scooped up the ball with a sigh. She knew Bruce, all right. Bruce was her dad. The last time she'd seen him he'd been sampling five different kinds of home brew on the front porch, despite the early February cold, with the beers lined up on the railing so that he could "admire the head on each" before he chugged. He brewed his beer in a shed on the property that he always kept locked up like Fort Knox. When he wasn't brewing, he was selling the stuff under the table. When he wasn't doing that, he was selling

bait to fishermen who were foolhardy enough to tie their boats up to his decrepit dock.

Annie Taylor's mentioning a key made Jenn first think that her dad was handing over his Fort-Knox-of-Brewing shed to a stranger. But then Annie added, "There's a trailer here, right? I'm moving into it. The man I'm renting from – Eddie Beddoe? – he said Bruce would be waiting for me with the key. So is he down there?" She gestured past the obstacle course. Jenn nodded yeah, but what she was thinking was that Annie had to be talking about a different trailer because no way could anyone live in the wreck that had stood abandoned not far from Jenn's house for all of her life.

Annie said, "Great. So if you don't mind . . . ? C'n I . . . ? Well, can I get this stuff out of the way?"

Jenn began to kick her obstacles to one side of the lane. Annie came to help, leaving her Honda running. She was tall – but since Jenn was only five two, pretty much everyone was tall – and she had lots of freckles. What she was wearing looked like something she'd purchased in Bellevue on her way to the island: skinny jeans, boots, a turtleneck sweater, a parka, a scarf. She looked like an ad for the outdoor life in Washington State, except what she had on was way too put together to be something a real outdoorsman would wear. Jenn couldn't help wondering what the hell Annie Taylor was doing here aside from being on the run from the law.

Soccer ball under her arm, she trailed Annie's car to the vicinity of the trailer. Her reaction to the sight of it, Jenn decided, was going to be more interesting than dribbling.

"Oh!" was the expression on Annie Taylor's face when Jenn caught up to her. It wasn't the oh of "Oh how cool," though. It was more the oh of "Oh my God, what have I done?" She'd gotten out of her car and was standing

transfixed, with all her attention on the only trailer in the vicinity. “This is . . . uh . . . it?” she said with a glance at Jenn.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Jenn replied sardonically. “If you’re into living with black mold and mildew, you’re in the right place.”

“Possession Point,” Annie said, pretty much to herself. And again then to Jenn, “This is . . . for real? I mean, this is it? You don’t live here, too, do you?” Annie looked around but, of course, there wasn’t much to see that would reassure anyone about this dismal place.

Jenn pointed out her house, a short distance away and closer to the water. The building was old but in marginally better condition than the trailer. It was gray clapboard, with a questionable roof, and just beyond it at the edge of the water, a bait shack tumbled in the direction of a dock. Both of these structures seemed to rise out of the heaps of driftwood, piles of old nets, and masses of everything from overturned aluminum boats to upended toilets.

As Annie Taylor took all this in, Jenn’s father, Bruce, came out of the house and down the rickety front steps of the porch. He was calling out, “You Annie Taylor?” to which Annie replied with little enthusiasm, “You must be Mr. McDaniels.”

“You are in the presence,” he said.

“That’s . . . uh . . . That’s great,” Annie replied although the hesitation in her words definitely indicated otherwise.

Jenn could hardly blame her. In her whole life, Annie Taylor had probably never seen anyone like Bruce McDaniels. He enjoyed being a character with a capital C, and he played up anything that made him eccentric. So he kept his gray hair Ben Franklin style down to his shoulders. He covered his soup-bowl-sized bald pate with a ski cap that read SKI SQUAW VALLEY although he’d never been on skis in his life. He was in terrible shape, skinny like a scarecrow everywhere

except for his belly, which overhung his trousers and made him look pregnant most of the time.

He was digging in his pocket, saying, “Gotcher key right here,” when the front door opened again, and Jenn’s two little brothers came storming out.

“Who the hell’s *she*?” Petey demanded.

“Dad, he ate a damn hot dog and they were ’posed to be for damn dinner!” Andy cried. “Jenny, tell ’im! You heard Mom say.”

“Desist, rug rats,” was Bruce McDaniels’s happy reply. “This is Annie Taylor, our new neighbor. And these, Annie, are the fruit of my loins: Jennifer, Petey, and Andy. Jenn’s the one with the soccer ball, by the way.” He chuckled as if he’d made a great joke although Jenn’s pixie haircut and lack of curves had resulted in her being mistaken for a boy more than once.

Annie said politely that it was nice to meet them all, at which point Bruce ceremoniously handed over the key to the trailer. He told her he’d given the door’s lock a good oiling that very morning and she’d find the place in tiptop shape with everything inside in working order.

Annie looked doubtful, but she murmured, “Wonderful, then,” as she accepted the key from him. She settled her shoulders, unlocked the door, stuck her head inside, and said, “Oh gosh.” She popped out as quickly as she’d popped in. She shot the McDaniels spectators a smile and began the process of unloading her car. She had boxes neatly taped and marked. She had a computer and a printer. She had a spectacular set of matching luggage. She started heaving everything just inside the door of the trailer.

No one in the McDaniels group made a move to help her, but who could blame them? For not one of them even began to believe that she would last one night in the place.

★

Jenn avoided Annie Taylor for the first twenty-four hours of her stay, mostly out of embarrassment. Three hours after Annie had emptied her car, Jenn's mom had come rumbling home in the Subaru Forester that did service as South Whidbey Taxi Company. Bruce McDaniels had been continuing his extensive experiment in the quality control of his brews for those three hours, and when Jenn's mom got out of the Subaru and began trudging tiredly toward the house, he'd greeted her by belting out "Kuh-kuh-kuh Katie! My bee-you-tee-full Katie!" He ran to greet her, falling on his knees and singing at full pitch, and Jenn's mom had cried, "How could you! Again!" and promptly burst into tears. Jenn recovered from the excruciating humiliation of all this by hiding out in her bedroom and wishing her parents would both disappear, taking Andy and Petey with them.

From her window, she spied on Annie Taylor, who left the trailer periodically either to haul wood inside for the stove that heated the place or to walk on the driftwood-cluttered beach. When she did this latter thing, she carried a pair of binoculars with her. Perched upon the gnarled roots of a piece of driftwood, she used the binoculars to scan the surface of the water. Jenn figured at first she was looking for the resident orcas. Killer whales made use of Possession Sound at all times of the year, and seventy of them lived within fifty miles of Whidbey Island. To Jenn, they were the only sea creatures of interest.

The third time Annie walked the beach, she took a camera and tripod with her. Jenn decided she was probably a wild-life photographer, then, and she asked her father this at breakfast on the day after Annie's arrival. He was the only person up aside from Jenn. The day was freezing cold outside, and as usual it wasn't much warmer in the house. Everyone else in the family had apparently decided the best course

was to wait out the cold beneath the covers, but it wasn't raining, and clear weather meant running practice, which was what Jenn intended to do. Still, there was the matter of Annie. . . .

"Hell if I know," was Bruce's answer to Jenn's question about the young woman and photography. "All I do is collect the rent and all I care about her is: is she quiet at night and will she keep from scaring the herring in the bait pool. You'll have to ask Eddie if you want to know more. Far's I'm concerned, ignorance is *b-l-i-s-s*." He'd been reading a week-old edition of the *South Whidbey Record* as he spoke. But he looked up then, took in Jenn's attire, and said, "Just where the hell you going?" when she told him she'd see him later.

"Sprints," she said. "Tryouts coming up. All Island Girls' Soccer. You know."

"For God's sake be careful if you're going on the road. There's ice out there and if you break a leg—"

"I won't break a leg," she told him.

Outside, she began to stretch, using the porch steps and the railing. Her breath was like a fog machine in the freezing air.

A bang sounded from the trailer on the far side of the property, and Annie Taylor stalked outside. She had on so many layers of clothing that Jenn was surprised she could move. She headed for the woodpile and grabbed up an armful.

"Stupid, idiot, frigging, asinine, useless, oh yeah right," came from Annie to Jenn across the yard. "Like this is supposed to . . . Oh *great*. Thank you very much."

Jenn watched as Annie piled up wood and staggered with it back to the trailer. She gave a curious look to the woodpile. The Florida woman was sure going through it. Except . . . Jenn realized that there was no scent of woodsmoke in the morning air.

She went over to the trailer's door. She stuck her head inside and said, "Sure are going through the wood, huh?"

Annie glanced over at her from a squat woodstove in front of which she was kneeling. "Oh, I sure as hell wish," she said. "None of it's burning. I'm just trying to find a damn log that will."

"Weird," Jenn said. "It should burn fine."

"Well, *should burn* and *does burn* are two different things. If you see smoke coming out of this trailer, believe me, it's going to be from my ears."

"Want me to take a look?"

"Be my guest. If you can make this shit burn – pardon my French but I am so frustrated and I spent the whole damn night freezing my tits off – I owe you breakfast."

Jenn laughed. "Frozen tits, huh?" she said. "Ouch. Lemme look at the stove."