

GONE TOO FAR

SUZANNE BROCKMANN

Gone Too Far is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Any mistakes I've made or liberties I've taken are completely my own.

GONE TOO FAR

For the brave men and women who fought for freedom during the Second World War, and for the brave men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces who continue that fight today. My most sincere and humble thanks. Let freedom ring!

PROLOGUE

FORT WORTH, TEXAS
1984

His lunch pail was empty.
Again.

Roger Starrett quickly closed it and latched it back up, looking around the middle school cafeteria, praying no one had seen.

He'd thought his mother was okay this morning. He'd heard her moving around in her bedroom while he was getting dressed. And there were definite signs of life in the kitchen—a cigarette still smoldering in the ashtray, his beat-up lunch pail standing out on the counter, looking ready to go.

He'd grabbed it on his way out the door, late for school, not noticing—again—that it was unusually light.

His stomach rumbled as he got up from the table, joining the line of kids who'd wolfed down their pb and j and were now shuffling past Mrs. Hollings—King's Gate Middle School's own personal Checkpoint Charlie.

She narrowed her eyes at Roger from her perch atop her stool. No doubt she'd noticed him coming into the cafeteria just a few moments ago. She always noticed him. "You finished your entire lunch?"

"Yes, ma'am." He opened his lunchbox, exhibit A. Not a crumb in sight. You mean old bitch.

“Go on, then. But I’m watching you.”

No kidding. Roger walked outside, purposely keeping his pace slow and steady until he went around the corner of the building and out of her line of sight.

And then he was free. He broke into a dead run as he hit the cracked asphalt, heading past it and onto the football field, toward the creek and the woods back behind the school.

If he hauled ass, he could make it all the way home, check on his mother, grab himself a quick bowl of cornflakes—he knew there were some in the cabinet because he’d had ’em for dinner last night—and then race back to school before Mrs. Hellbitch even knew he was gone.

Noah Gaines had barely sat down on a log and opened his book when he heard the sound of voices. But he didn’t look up. He just kept on reading.

Bobby Kemp and Luke Duchamps and several other eighth-grade boys Noah didn’t know very well came splashing across the creek.

They were loud, they were stupid, and they would be gone in a matter of minutes.

They were playing *George of the Jungle*, climbing up into the trees as high as they could go without the slender branches bending—which wasn’t very high—and whooping like crazy.

Luke ran past and kicked the book out of his hands. “Whatcha reading, Einstein?”

“Nothing you’d like,” Noah picked it up and brushed it off and sat back down. “It doesn’t have pictures.”

Oh, man. He was so screwed. He’d actually said that loud enough for Luke to hear.

“What did you say?” Luke circled back around, coming to a stop in front of Noah, catching his breath as he gave him his best Clint Eastwood glare. Which wasn’t particularly good. The only thing Luke had in common with Clint was that they were both white. After that, there was no comparison.

“Nothing,” Noah muttered, hating that now Luke would think he was a coward. He wasn’t. He just wanted the bigger boy to leave him alone. There were only twenty-three minutes left in the lunch period, and he wanted to spend as many of them as possible with this book.

But Luke pushed him, and Noah sprawled back on his butt, in the dirt.

One of these days, he was going to get his growing on, as his grandmother always said. And then Luke was going to slink across to the other side of the street whenever he saw Noah coming—all six foot four of him, just like his grandfather.

“Come on, Luke,” Bobby called from the creek, moving on, ready to disrupt someone else’s peace and quiet.

Luke, however, wasn’t done. “What *you* looking at?”

Noah turned to see that Luke’s attention was on the trail, where a skinny white boy stood. He was watching them, his blue eyes wary.

Great. It was that stupid kid from Mrs. H’s class. It could have been one of the high school kids who lived at the end of Noah’s block, but no, it was just Roger, who was barely taller than Noah, whose mother drank too much, who’d brought an empty lunchbox with him to school again today.

Noah had seen his face in the cafeteria, right when Noah was slipping out the door himself, his own sandwich safely stashed in his pocket.

“I’m looking at *you*, asshole,” Roger drawled with a twang that was actually real, gazing at Luke with the kind of expression on his face more suitable for someone at least twelve inches taller and much broader, too. “I’m wondering why you don’t pick on someone your *own* size.”

Yeah, it was Roger, all right. Roger, who was always getting into trouble with Mrs. Hollings—who’d actually called her dick breath to her face, in front of the entire class.

“Someone like *you*, maybe?” Luke scoffed. He had to have had at least thirty pounds on the younger boy.

Yes, it was good old Roger, who just didn’t know when to keep his big mouth shut. He didn’t know that if he’d just shrugged and turned away, Luke would have made a little more noise, maybe knocked the log Noah had been sitting on into the creek, and then disappeared, no real harm done.

“I’m bigger’n *him*.” Roger motioned to Noah with his chin.

“There’re kindergartners who could pound *his* ass.” Luke laughed.

“I resent that.” Noah started to climb to his feet, but Luke gave him another shove—one that actually hurt this time as he landed on his tailbone in the dust.

“I resent that,” Luke mocked him. “No one really talks like that.”

Noah’s grandfather did.

“Leave him alone,” Roger tersely ordered Luke. It was much better

than Luke's imitation of Clint Eastwood, although Noah would bet that Roger wasn't trying to imitate anyone.

"Why don't you make me?"

"Why don't you come over here so that I *can* make you, dickhead?" Roger countered.

Oh, no, this was *not* the way to end this quickly and bloodlessly.

"Look," Noah started to say.

"Come on, Luke," Bobby whined from down beyond the bend in the trail.

Roger looked directly at Noah. *Get ready to run*, he mouthed silently, while Luke called, "Hold up!" back to Bobby.

"What are you doing?" Bobby complained.

And wasn't *that* what they needed? For Bobby to come and see what was keeping Luke and decide to join in the fun, pulverizing a couple of seventh graders.

"Lukey's trying to talk Einstein here into sucking his dick," Roger called loudly to Bobby and whoever else was in shouting distance.

Luke turned white and then red, and then lunged at Roger.

Leaving Noah finally free to scramble to his feet.

"Go," Roger shouted at Noah as he took to the trees to escape Luke's wrath.

Luke was going to kill Roger. There was no doubt about it. He was going to catch him, and then he was going to tear him into pieces. Noah hesitated. How could he run away and leave Roger to that fate?

As he watched, the kid climbed higher and higher into the trees. He was light, he was fast, and Luke didn't have a prayer of catching him up there. Those branches wouldn't hold the bigger boy's weight.

There was a *crack*, and Luke lunged for the trunk of the tree, clinging to it with all of his might.

Noah started backing away. This was where Luke would realize Roger was out of reach and decide to take his anger out on him.

"What are you waiting for, shit brains?" Roger shouted at Noah. "You're supposed to be back on the school field by now!"

This kid had what Grandpa would call "a colorful way with the English language."

"What if he catches you?" Noah called back. *If?* There was no *if* involved. It was inevitable. Roger couldn't stay in that tree forever. And when he came down, Luke was going to kill him.

He hadn't planned this out very well.

Roger was silent, apparently realizing the very same thing.

Bobby made the scene. "What are you doing, Duchamps?"

"Get down from there now, and I'll only beat you within an inch of your life," Luke growled up at Roger.

"Yeah, I bet you want to beat me," Roger taunted, with an accompanying gesture that meant . . . Oh, man, this kid wasn't just asking for death, but a painful and horrific death.

Luke climbed higher, disregarding the danger. As Noah watched, he lunged for Roger and caught his sneaker. He grabbed and pulled and . . .

Crack!

The branch Luke was standing on gave way.

It happened so fast. One minute both boys were in the tree, and the next Luke was crumpled on the ground.

Roger had fallen, too, but he'd managed to catch himself on one of the lower branches. He hung there now, swinging slightly, one sneaker on, one skinny foot bare.

"Luke!" Bobby started toward his friend but stopped short. "Oh, shit." He backed away.

Luke moaned and stirred and caught sight of his leg and started to scream.

His leg was broken. It was *really* broken, with a jagged piece of bone sticking out, right through a hole in his pants.

Roger dropped lightly out of the tree, landing beside him. "Holy *fuck!*"

Bobby hit the ground with his backside, clearly unable to stand. Noah could relate. He was feeling a little light-headed himself.

"He's bleeding bad," Roger said, kneeling beside Luke. "Jesus, oh, Jesus! You must have cut a vein."

"I'm going to die," Luke wailed. "I'm going to die!"

"Artery," Noah said faintly. "Veins take blood into the heart, arteries take it out."

"Gee, that's important to know right now," Roger said. "Bobby! Run back to school and get help!"

Bobby didn't move.

"I don't want to die," Luke howled.

"You—shut the fuck up," Roger snapped, "and you—Bobby! Get off your fat ass *and run back to school! Now!*"

Bobby staggered off.

Roger looked at Noah. "Do you know how to make a tourniquet, Einstein?"

"Yes," Noah said.

Roger nodded curtly. "That's the answer I was hoping for. I didn't pay much attention when we did that chapter on first aid in health class."

"I did," Noah said. He took off his T-shirt. There was a tear under the arm, and he put his fingers in the hole and pulled so that it would rip. He needed a strip long enough to tie around the top of Luke's leg.

Except his leg was broken right there, right at his thigh. How on earth were they going to do this without hurting him worse?

"You hear that?" Roger was saying to Luke, who was crying, tears running down his face. "You got lucky and fucked yourself up in the presence of *the* one person in King's Gate who actually paid attention during health class. I think you can erase dying from the list of things you're going to do today, Duchamps."

Noah couldn't tear his T-shirt past the side seam. "Help me with this," he said.

Roger took the shirt from him and stood up.

"Don't leave me here!" Luke sobbed.

But Roger was just digging into the pocket of his jeans. "No one's leaving you anywhere," he said as he came up with a Swiss army knife and quickly cut Noah's shirt.

Noah must've looked green at the idea of tying that around Luke's thigh, with all that blood, so close to the jagged edge of that hideous bone, because Roger didn't even try to hand the shirt back to him. "Okay," he said to Noah, kneeling down next to Luke. "Tell me what to do."

"You've got to tie it around his leg," Noah said. "As close to his, you know, groin area as you can. There's a pressure point there, right at the inside of his leg."

Roger nodded, his face pale. He glanced up at Noah. "Hold his hands," he said, then waited while Noah came around to Luke's other side and knelt down beside the older boy.

Luke flailed at both of them. "Don't touch me! What are you doing with that thing?"

"We have to stop the bleeding," Roger said to Luke, speaking slowly and clearly. "I know this might hurt you, Duchamps, and I'm deeply sorry if it does, but—"

"I want my mama!" Luke wept. "Where's my mama?"

"She'll be here soon," Roger reassured him, his voice surprisingly gentle. "I just know it. Bobby went to get help and they're going to call your mama and she'll rush right over. She's probably already on her way. But right now I know she wants me to tie Einstein's shirt around your leg so that you don't die."

"I don't want to die!"

"I know you don't," Roger said, still using that soothing voice. "So you just hold on to Einstein's hands. Both of his in both of yours, and close your eyes and breathe."

He looked over, nodding as Noah got a firm grip on Luke's hands.

Roger took a deep breath and Noah closed his own eyes.

Luke screamed and Roger said a whole bunch of words that Noah had never heard before. At least not all in a row like that. Then, "How tight do I tie it?"

"It's got to be pretty tight," Noah said. Man, Luke was nearly breaking his fingers.

"Open your eyes and check this," Roger ordered. "It's not squirting so much anymore."

Noah did. He had to look across that terrible wound, but . . . He nodded, swallowing hard. "That looks right."

Roger put his hand on Luke's shoulder. "You're going to be okay," he told him. "You are one tough son of a bitch, Duchamps."

"Yeah," Luke sobbed. "Yeah."

Noah could hear sirens approaching the school.

"This is almost over," Roger crooned to Luke. "Just hang on a little bit longer. Help is coming. Any minute now. They're going to give you something for the pain, and your mama's gonna be there, and you're going to float on home. Any minute now. You're just going to float. Here they come. . . ."

And there they were. Paramedics with a stretcher, pushing Roger and Noah aside.

The medics got Luke ready to transport, calling on their radios ahead to the ambulance driver and to the hospital, giving Luke some kind of medication that made him stop crying—just like Roger had promised.

And then they were moving Luke out of there.

It was only then, as they were hustling the injured boy down the trail, that Roger dropped to his knees and threw up in the dirt.

Roger sat outside the principal's office, waiting to find out if he was going to be suspended from school.

Again.

Waiting to find out if his father was going to beat the shit out of him.

Again.

He almost didn't care anymore.

No one was watching him, and he took the opportunity to examine the palms of his hands. He'd torn the hell out of them catching himself on that tree branch. Some parts were already blistered, and others were scraped and still oozing blood. It hurt like a bitch, but it was nothing compared to Luke's broken leg.

The principal's door opened, and Roger quickly hid his hands beside him as the black kid, the scrawny one everybody called Einstein, came out, followed by Mr. York. The kid was wearing one of those dorky purple-and-gold King's Gate Middle School T-shirts—his own shirt had been trashed.

York cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I haven't been able to reach your mother," he said to Roger.

"She, uh, wasn't feeling well this morning, sir. And my father . . . he's out of town. You know, on business?" His father sold farm equipment and spent more time on the road than he did at home. Praise be to Jesus.

York nodded. "Mr. Gaines here told me how your quick thinking and fast action saved Luke Duchamps's life today."

Roger didn't dare look at Einstein. Was it possible . . . ? He was light-headed from hunger. He'd puked his brains out back on the trail, emptying what little had been in his stomach, and he still felt dizzy.

Not to mention that his mouth tasted like the contents of his gym locker.

Einstein nudged him, and Roger looked up to see that the kid had gotten him a cup of water from the bubbler in the corner of the principal's outer office.

"Thanks," Roger whispered. Aside from the puking and the pain from his hands, he'd been fine up to now. So why were his eyes suddenly filling with tears?

"Don't chug it," Einstein told him.

Roger nodded, taking little sips of water and gritting his teeth until the worst of the urge to throw himself onto the office floor and cry had passed.

"Mr. Gaines's grandfather is coming to pick him up," York told Roger.

"He's offered to drive you home, too. I think you boys have had enough school for one day."

Roger looked up at that. Holy shit. Enough school . . . ?

"Or you could come over to my house and have something to eat," Einstein said quietly, as if he somehow knew the only thing in the cabinet at Roger's house was that last box of stale cornflakes.

Roger nodded. "Thanks," he said again.

"We'll wait for my grandfather out front," Einstein told Mr. York. *Told* him. Not asked.

It was amazing. They were going home early, but they weren't in trouble.

Roger followed Einstein to the bench out in front of the school's lobby. "Whatever you told him . . . thanks," he said.

Einstein's eyes were a light shade of brown behind his glasses. "I told him the truth. I'm Noah, by the way."

"Sorry about, you know, puking like that. I hope I didn't spray your shoes. I was just, you know . . ."

"It was really gross," Noah told him. "Luke's leg, I mean."

Roger laughed. "No shit."

They sat in silence for a moment, then Noah said, "I couldn't have done what you did."

What could he say to that? "Sure you could've."

"I don't think so."

"Well, I do." When it came down to it, Noah hadn't run away. Roger was still surprised about that. He was either stupid or brave. And with a nickname like Einstein, chances were he wasn't stupid.

"You like Italian food?" Noah asked, kicking at a crack in the sidewalk with the toe of his sneakers.

"You mean, like spaghetti and meatballs?" Roger countered.

Noah laughed. "Sort of, but much better. My grandfather spent some time in Italy during World War Two and he learned to cook while he was there. He'll make us something good to eat."

Something good to eat. It sounded too miraculous to be true. "You don't have to invite me over, you know," Roger said. "You don't even need to drive me home. I can walk."

Noah nodded. "I know." He stood up as a station wagon—a shiny new one in a really nice shade of blue—approached.

The black man behind the wheel was huge. It seemed impossible that scrawny little Noah was related to him. He had a broad, handsome face and a full head of thick black hair despite the fact that he was old. And he had the warmest, friendliest smile Roger had ever seen.

"Hail, the conquering heroes," the man said in greeting, his voice a booming bass, his accent one that Roger couldn't place. He wasn't from Texas, that was for damn sure. "You must be Roger. Climb in, young man. I'm Walter Gaines and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Noah got into the front. Roger hesitated only a fraction of a second before he climbed into the backseat of that car.

After all the blood and shouting that had gone down just a short time earlier, it seemed like a very quiet choice. An unremarkable, nothing-much kind of decision.

But getting into that car was, without a doubt, the pivotal moment of Roger Starrett's young life.

CHAPTER ONE

SARASOTA, FLORIDA
MONDAY, JUNE 16, 2003

Roger “Sam” Starrett’s cell phone vibrated, but he was wedged into the rental car so tightly that there was no way he could get the damn thing out of the front pocket of his jeans.

At least not without causing a twelve-car pileup on Route 75.

He had the air-conditioning cranked—welcome to summer in Florida—and the gas pedal floored, but the subcompact piece of shit that had been one of the last cars in the rental company’s lot was neither cool nor fast.

It was barely a car.

Feeling trapped in an uncomfortable place had been pretty much SOP for Sam ever since he rushed into marriage with Mary Lou nearly two years ago, and he waited for the familiar waves of irritation and anger to wash over him.

Instead, he felt something strangely similar to relief.

Because Sarasota was only another few minutes down the road. And the end was finally in sight.

Sam knew the town well enough—he’d hitched down here from his parents’ house in Fort Worth, Texas, four summers in a row, starting when he turned fifteen. It had changed a lot since then, but he had to believe that the circus school was still over by Ringling Boulevard.

Which wasn’t too far from Mary Lou’s street address.