

Never Go Back – A.G. Lane – a Novel of Suspense – an excerpt

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A.G. Lane

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Anna Willard worked her way down the beach, heading east, squinting in the morning light. When she'd begun, it had barely been light out, but now the eastern sky was turning from dawn gray to winter white, the sun a bright, indistinct ball casting sharp, brilliant rays through the splayed and bare branches of the trees.

Her foot twisted on some loose rocks and she felt a sharp pain in her ankle. She slowed and moved painfully along, determined to keep some semblance of her pace going. It was punishment, these runs, forcing her up and out before the sun rose, along the familiar paved road, past the houses of people she had once known, down the hill and into the cut-through that led down to the beach, where she tried, as much as she could, to run along the wet side near the water mark, where her sneakers could find purchase. At this point, as she rounded the curve and headed towards Tarquin Rock, the wind usually hit her full in the face and the shoreline grew rocky and treacherous.

Anna took a moment to look up and out. Weston Harbor, on this November morning, was flat and calm, the barest ripple of wind feathering across the steel gray water. A workboat was chugging out through the channel and the captain, in waders and warm flannel coat waved his arm in a gesture of hello. She had seen him and his boat every morning since she'd been home, and now, through her deep breaths, she raised her own hand.

The pain in her ankle subsided. It had been a momentary wrench and she started to move again, feeling her limbs stretch out, the sand underneath eaten by her strong stride. The tide

had been high last night, a full moon making it especially so. It was dead low now, she judged and the air, when she breathed in, smelled of mud, the tanginess of it mitigated by the crisp coolness of the air. She had another half mile to go before she reached the bottom of her stairs. In all, her route was short, only three miles, and since she had been back, she'd been able to work up to it quickly. Still though, it was such a pleasure to be out here, running along the beach, that she gave no thought to finding another path in order to lengthen her exercise. Her body would have to make do with three miles and no more.

Anna checked her watch and paced herself. She had cheated and hit the snooze button once this morning, snuggled deep in the warm bedclothes, giving in to a small moment of despair, the shambles her life had been crowding into the fresh start she was so carefully building.

She passed Tarquin's Rock and was well on her way past Conrad's house when she saw something in the reeds. She slowed and then stopped. It wasn't unusual to see things caught in the marsh grass. It was an efficient net and all sorts of things could be scavenged. Buoys, oars, anchors, boats. Once, even a small shark had washed up on the beach where it had lain for days, sweltering in the August sun as people came to look at it, wondering how an ocean creature had made its way into their protected inlet.

Anna was reminded of that time now, as she approached the thing, whatever it was. She was almost at the foot of Conrad's stairs and she looked up, almost as if summoning him. But it would be no use. Conrad had stopped taking care of the stairs years ago, even before Charles had left and now they were in disrepair. A board swung loosely in the breeze, from the top-most part, wood rasping against other gray, salt soaked wood, the whole sound very much like a the call of an exotic bird. She saw that the top part of the stairs, on its first zig down the

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slope, had several broken boards. Jagged edges, the wood
white and freshly broken, stood up against the dark scrub of the
bluff.

Something flew up as she got closer, and she shrank back as
she saw it was a crow. Anna swallowed and moved in, not
aware of anything, not of the slight pain still lingering in her
ankle, not of her cheeks that were growing cold as her body
chilled quickly, nor of the slight runniness of her nose. Her
eyes were fixed forward, her mouth slightly open and her
breath caught.

Marsh grass slithered in the wind and she heard the
workboat's motor slow and then start up again in her direction.
She looked up as it came closer, a long-low flat boat, with
nothing more than a plywood shack on top of it, all painted a
non-descript gray so that it blended in with the winter's colors.

“What is that there?” The man's voice called, part of the
syllables echoing out long and low over the water.

“It's something.” Anna said. But that was not it at all, it
wasn't something, it was someone. She moved closer and saw
that it was caught in the reeds, face down in the mud, the body
clothed in gray trousers and a white shirt, the shock of white
hair with bluish colored scalp showing through. She
swallowed hard and looked back and up, the board at the top of
Conrad Franklin's steps creaking more and more wildly in the
wind.

The flat boat pulled up on the mud and the man jumped off,
his waders squelching in the sand, water shooting up. He
started to run and then stopped, the two of them on opposite
sides of the body.

He looked at her, and she nodded. It seemed that they
needed to know before they did anything else, so he reached
down and turned over the form, grunting against its weight.
The body rolled over with a thud and soft sucking noise. The

face was full up in the sun, the eyes opened and staring and
Anna gasped and sunk down to her knees, not minding that she
was mired in the mud.

Charles stood in the corner, in his father's house, trying to nurse his drink. He had made it through the funeral and then the ceremony at the gravesite. And now here he was, back at the house, surrounded by people he did not know, a stranger in his home.

But she moved through the crowd, as if she belonged, the right mix of sympathy and assurance. What was she doing here? What had his father been thinking? Charles threw back another gulp of whisky, knowing that he kept people away by his scowl. It was his own goddamn father's funeral and he was going to get drunk. And no one could stop him.

He followed her with his eyes until she looked his way. She glanced away and he was satisfied. She couldn't stand to look at him, not after what had happened. What had happened? He had wanted her and she had said no, she couldn't. Simple as that. His pride had been hurt and he called a tease. A mean thing to do. She told him he was being a fool, being reckless. He ignored her. They'd both been right, hadn't they? His father hadn't told him she was back. His father hadn't told him that he had asked her to come back and as Charles finished his drink, he wondered just what his father had been thinking.

Anna moved through the crowd, doing her best to ignore the sullen presence of Charles, alone and drinking in the corner. Jack Harris had taken charge of her when she arrived, parking her old convertible alongside the array of luxury cars. She mounted the steps of the Franklin house. It was a monstrosity with a water view. Once Lydia Franklin had

divorced Conrad, all restraint had fallen away. Conrad had many passions, unfortunately, none of them matched. Colors had not mattered to the man at all, neither had the differences between marble, tile and linoleum. He lived at the whim of any decorator who sensed a commission but, typically, he lost interest in their efforts and stopped paying. Even the outside was a mess, a mix of shingles, clapboards and fieldstones, the trim two different shades of blue. Inside modern sculpture vied with sepia tinted photographs. It was a grand house, in its oddity, the rooms well sized, filled now with dark suited mourners and white-coated caterers.

The desire to leave was so strong Anna almost escaped before Jack took a hold of her and propelled her into the living room.

"There are some people I want you to meet." He said and introduced her.

A group of men perked up when they heard her name. Their faces were uniformly bland, but their stances betrayed their impatience, as if they too would rather be anywhere but here.

They were taking her measure, trying to match an image with the name, and Anna, her discomfort growing, tried to smile.

"It's wonderful to have the next generation join us. We're preparing for the future." Jack said, his arm curving protectively around her. She resisted the urge to shake it off.

"And where were you before you joined The Franklin Group?" One of them asked, his free hand fluttering like it would like to fly off, his eyes hidden behind glasses.

"I was with Capital Trust in London."

All of them nodded. It was a name they knew, a good name.

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“Anna was in client relations. She’s already doing a wonderful job here. Perhaps you saw the profile of the firm in the *Financial Times*? It mentioned her specifically.”

They nodded, almost as a group. No they hadn’t read the profile, but it was good to know. At least the bad news hadn’t traveled as fast here as it had in London.

“And what are you doing now, for the firm?”

“Primarily client relations. But I was working with Conrad on investment strategy.” She wanted them to know she was good for more than a few lunches and free tickets.

“Well, they were the best, Lucas and Con.” All of them raised their glasses in a toast and Jack maneuvered them away.

“There are a few other people I would like you to meet, if you don’t mind. Just offer them some reassurance, remind them that you have experience, you’re looking forward to a long future with the firm.”

Anna thought that last was good to know. That was something.

“What about Charles?”

Jack looked at her and then scanned the room. Anna followed his glance and saw Charles alone in a corner, the glass of whiskey in his hand, a haggard look on his face.

“What about him?”

“Well, if you want to make such a big deal about me, then people will start to ask about him.”

“Charles Franklin is not a member of the firm. You are. We’ll have to let Charles answer those questions on his own, won’t we? Just tell people you don’t know what his plans are.”

Which was the truth. None of them knew how big a part Charles would play in their future. Anna felt herself tighten a little. Her future could be in his hands, her position at The Franklin Group determined by her boss. Which had been Conrad, was now Jack, and tomorrow, who knew?

Anna looked at Jack, whose face was not quite bland. She saw what he was thinking - that Charles wasn’t going to inherit the firm. In Jack’s mind there was no way that Conrad would make such a decision, to leave a company on whom more than a few people relied, in the hands of a novice, at best, an irresponsible playboy at worst.

“I see. Thank you, Jack.” Anna smiled briefly and moved away, thinking that in all of the years Jack Harris had worked for Conrad Franklin, he had failed to see the fundamental foundation of the man. For Conrad, blood really was thicker than water.

Charles stopped trying to nurse his drinks after the second, so he kept swallowing them faster and faster. He was floating along in his alcohol haze, taking in the scene spread before him. Was this his house? He didn’t know. They had fought the last time they spoke, his father doing his best to convince him to come back. Charles had refused again and his father had threatened to give him nothing. He had called to tell his father the good news and Conrad had assumed he wanted money. A long speech about duty and responsibility had followed. It had been a waste of breath for Charles to remind his father that he had been on his own, since he was nineteen and the first time his father had disinherited him for not following the plan, for chucking Harvard to go to design school, to build furniture. No son of Conrad’s became a furniture designer.

His father had relented intermittently, but Charles had refused to accept any help from him after that, knowing there were strings attached. It would have made it easier, money, allowing him to start his own design shop, instead of working for others, saving, waiting, trying to encourage investors and patrons on his own. And now it was finally coming together

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for him, and that’s what he had called to tell his father about,
the good news that there were investors, someone interested in
building his line. The feeling was so amazing he had to share.
But apparently his father hadn’t shared it. Apparently it was
the last break, a final show of independence, a deathblow to
Conrad Franklin’s dream of Franklin and Son.

And they hadn’t spoken since, the call from Jack Harris
shocking, and now being here, seeing Anna here, knowing his
father had kept that from him. What sort of game had Conrad
been playing?

He let his eyes follow her, the jacket of her suit fitting
perfectly over the curves of her body, the fall of her dark hair
gently framing her delicate face, the gray eyes somber. She
was the only one, he thought, who actually looked sad.

All of these suits and these faces, looking serious and
purposeful, everyone avoiding the subject carefully. What had
Conrad Franklin been doing out in the middle of the night in
his clothes, no jacket, standing outside in the full moon, in the
bitter cold on the extra slippery edge of the bluff that plunged
sharply down to a rocky beach and the remains of an old
breakwater? What had he been doing out there in the middle of
the night, drunk and smoking, raving and acting like a lunatic?
Because apparently, that’s what he’d become. His father had
gone crazy and no one bothered to tell him about it. Though,
he’d known, or begun to suspect that all of the years of alcohol
were beginning to catch up with his father.

Charles pushed that thought away, drained the rest of
his drink and pushed off, moving carelessly through the crowd.
Snatches of conversation reached him, as if people had
forgotten that he was even there.

“A shame really.”

“That Anna girl is really something.”

“The firm would be in good hands if she took over.”

“I don’t know about that Franklin boy.”

“He won’t be taking over, will he?”

“I don’t know. He and Conrad never saw eye-to-eye on
that. He’s some sort of designer out in California.”

“Funny, he doesn’t look gay.”

Charles almost stopped at that, to tell the man that if he
would but let him have a few moments alone with his blonde
trophy wife he would indeed be happy to prove that he was not
at all gay.

He saw handshakes and secret winks, gazes that looked
on him pityingly, gazes that swirled around Anna with lust and
desire and admiration. Or was it all just a reflection of what he
was thinking? He made it to bar and leaned on it heavily. He
needed another drink.

Anna looked down at the little woman in front of her.
She had to lean down and close in to hear what the woman was
saying, since she refused to speak louder than a whisper.

“I remember your grandfather.”

Anna smiled. Not always a good thing.

“He was a good man,” she said, implying that Conrad
was not.

Anna figured the woman, Mrs. Smith, Sullivan,
whatever, was close to eighty. She looked scattered and
smelled like mothballs and lavender.

“I remember your mother.” Definitely not a good
thing, Anna thought and waited. There was no mention of her
father, no one remembered him, not even Anna who dutifully
sent him a card each Christmas. He was an alcoholic drifter
who lived on a boat in the Caribbean. The marriage to CeCe
had been just enough to give Anna legitimacy, which her
grandfather then decided to question by having her name
changed back to Willard.

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“I wanted to speak to you dear. Conrad wouldn’t listen to me, said I was being daft. But you’ll listen, Adi said you would.”

Anna didn’t know what the woman was talking about.

“Of course I’ll listen. What can I do for you?” A client was a client.

“There is something wrong with my account. I tried to get money and they said it wasn’t there. But then it was. And everything was fine.”

Anna smiled, not sure how she could help.

“Your bank account?”

“No, the firm account.”

“I’m sure it was nothing.” Anna looked up. There was a noise, a commotion towards the other end of the long room and she tensed.

Mrs. Sullivan-Smith looked at her. “I want to show you something.”

“Fine,” Anna said. “We’ll talk later, but you must excuse me, there’s something I need to attend to.”

Anna moved quickly, anger making her face tight, the crowd parting for her, sensing her.

Charles leaned heavily against the bar. A man in a white jacket was serving drinks. Charles thrust out his hand, the glass empty, the ice rattling.

“Whiskey, rocks, no splash, no twist.”

The bartender looked up and shook his head.

“I think you’ve had enough.” He said, calmly pouring a glass of chardonnay and handing it to a woman, who glanced between the two of them before gliding away.

Charles felt a presence at his arm and looked over. Jack Harris was there, mouth grim, eyes angry.

“I think the gentleman is right.”

Charles looked at him, hating the smoothness, the very reasonableness that oozed off of him. His father’s right hand man, the one prized for his ability to see to the detail, to clean up messes.

“Fuck you.” Charles said. “I’m the one paying here.”

Jack Harris seemed to take a breath and then said, “Technically, the firm is. So be very careful. Don’t mess things up. I think we know where all of our interests lie.” Jack kept his voice hushed, but Charles had not.

Charles threw a glance behind him. The leftover mourners were standing there, tense and uncomfortable.

Jack said, more firmly, louder, “I think you’ve had enough as well, and it’s time you went upstairs.”

He leaned in closer and put an arm around the crook of Charles’s elbow, hoisting him up. Charles tried to ignore the sudden swirling of the room around him, the way the colors muted and ran together in a spinning rainbow.

“Get your hands off of me.”

Jack leaned in even closer and said in an even voice, “You’re about to make a scene at your father’s funeral. You’re drunk and the rest of us are carrying you. I know that you don’t give a damn about what your father spent so many years building, but there are some of us here that do, that want to make sure that we don’t give our clients any more reason to be nervous. At the very least, think about yourself. You wouldn’t want to destroy the value of your inheritance.”

The last was said with a slight touch of mockery, and Charles had a sudden sense of clarity, that this man, who had helped, played the devoted employee, was waiting, waiting and hoping that Charles would get nothing.

“I would suggest that you don’t make this anymore difficult that it has to be.”

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Anna moved quickly, but not enough to avoid a scene. She emerged from the crowd as Charles cursed again and pulled away from Jack. A glass, heavy bottomed, slid to the floor and shattered, causing a collective gasp around the room and then silence.

“Get out.” Charles said, his speech thick.

Jack shook his head and drew himself up to his full height. Anna stormed ahead, ill-concealed fury on her face.

“I am just trying to help you. I think it would be better if you let us get you upstairs.”

Charles pulled himself up on the balls of his toes. It happened quickly, but not quickly enough. She managed to insert herself between the two of them, intending to put a stop to it, but Charles, already in his forward momentum, was unable to pull back. His hand connected with her face and she felt the blow that had been meant for Jack Harris.

Anna staggered back, more surprised than hurt. The swing overbalanced Charles and he crashed to the floor with a thud, hitting the marble floor, a look of pure pain crossing her face.

Anna found herself in someone’s arms, half fallen back. She glanced up. Tommy Anderson, the firm’s other associate, held her in his arms, eyes wide.

“Are you ok?”

She shook her head. The pain was fierce now, on her right cheek, her head throbbing, and she felt slightly nauseous.

“No, I don’t feel well.” A faint haze of black descended over everything and she slipped into it.