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books

BLOOD ON MY HANDS

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WALKER
BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

SATURDAY 11:45 P.M.

IN THE DARK woods behind the baseball dugout, I'm kneeling next to Katherine's body, my heart racing, my breaths shallow and fast, my emotions reeling crazily at the sight on the ground before me. Katherine is lying on her side, curled up, as if she was cowering from whoever attacked her. Her body is still warm, but there's no pulse. I know because I just pressed my index and middle fingers against her sticky wet neck and then to her wrist to feel her carotid and radial arteries, the ones the EMTs told me they checked. And that means she's dead. *Dead!* It can't be possible. Katherine ... who I've gone to school with, been friends—and enemies—with. My stomach hiccups spasmodically and I taste bile burning the back of my throat. I can't believe that this is happening, that I've just touched a dead person, someone I know, someone my own age.

Someone ... who's just been murdered.

The hot bile surges up into my throat again and I manage to swallow it back. Despite the cool autumn air, perspiration breaks out on my forehead and I feel its dampness on my skin. The slightest wisps of moonlight trickle down through the branches overhead, which cast shadows on Katherine's blood-mottled face. The light illuminates the horrible deep red slashes in her soft pale skin. Her eyes are open, blank, unseeing. I can't look at them.

Something, barely a glint in the dark, is lying on the ground beside her. I reach for it. A knife. The handle is wet, but this wetness has a different feel than water. Thicker, and both slipperier and stickier at the same time. I look down at the blade, blotched with blood, and can just make out near the handle a brand logo of two white stick-figure men against a square red background. Unwanted thoughts invade my brain—the horrible image of the blade slicing into Katherine's soft flesh. I feel my stomach churn again, the bile threatening to rise. I swallow hard, forcing it back.

Through the trees, footsteps approach, rustling the brush and branches. People are coming. I feel their shadows looming over me, and I look up at their dark silhouettes.

"You killed her!" That sounds like Dakota's voice.

What! The words startle like an unexpected punch. "No! What are you talking about? That's not what happened!"

"Why'd you do it?" another voice demands. In the

shadows behind the dugout, there's a small crowd now. Their dark faces are a blur.

"You know why," Dakota answers before I can even think of what to say.

There's a burst of light. Someone's taken a picture with a cell phone. I look down at the bloody knife in my hand. *Oh no!* Fear floods through me and I drop it. *I didn't do anything!* Just moments ago at the kegger, Dakota told me Katherine had disappeared, and said I should go look for her by the baseball dugout.

There's another flash. I spring to my feet, wiping my bloody hands on my jeans. How could they think I'd do such a thing? How could anyone do this to anyone?

"Call the cops," Dakota says.

"No!" I cry. "I mean, yes! You have to call them. But not because of me! I just found her here. I swear!"

People mutter. There's another flash. I take a step back. They can't be serious. They can't really believe I'd—

"Don't let her go," Dakota cautions.

"But I didn't do it!" I blurt.

"God, look who's talking," someone says.

"Do you believe it?" says Dakota. "Of all the people?"

The words pierce. Everyone knows why she's saying that. Because it's happened before. This is the second time in my life I've been this close to a bloodied, battered body. The second time I've seen the carnage one person can do to another. Suddenly it's obvious they're never going to believe me. Not in a million years.

"Don't let her go!" Dakota says with more urgency as I back farther from the body.

Panic-stricken, I turn and dive into the dark, running as fast as I can, crashing through the brush, slapping branches out of the way, stumbling on rocks, my face and arms being scratched by things I can't see.

"Get her!" Dakota yells, only now her voice is more distant.

They say I always ran. From the time I could walk. It was almost like I went straight from crawling to running. I was the kid in the hall the teachers were always telling to slow down, the one who'd run even when there was no rush. I'm little, only four foot ten and ninety-eight pounds. Coach Reynolds, who's in charge of the cross-country team, once told me he'd seen my type before. Small girls who could run forever. I didn't like being thought of as a "type," but there was some truth to it. I used to see other girls like me at meets. But I'd wonder if they ran for the same reason I did. In my family, it was a matter of survival.

CHAPTER 2

SATURDAY 11:53 P.M.

I COME OUT OF the woods, then dash across Seaver Street and into the Glen. The houses here are big old Tudors with spires, white stucco walls, and leaded windows. My heart is banging in my chest, from both running and fear. Slowing to a jog and weaving away from the bright spots under the streetlights, I know I have to find a place to stop and think. Finally, in a side yard, I see a child's playhouse. It's the size of a small shed, with a miniature porch, windows, and a door.

After tiptoeing across the lawn, I gently step onto the little porch and carefully, slowly, pull open the door, hoping it won't squeak. I'm praying that the people who own this property don't have a dog that will start barking. It's dark inside, but with the door open I can make out a small yellow plastic table and two red plastic child-size chairs. I let the door close and find myself in blackness. Can't see

my hands in front of my face. But it's oddly reassuring. If I can't see myself, then no one can see me, either. I sit on one of the chairs, press my face into my hands, and take steady breaths, trying to calm down.

But my heart's still drumming and I still cannot believe what just happened. Katherine murdered?

And now what? I've never run away like that before. I never did anything wrong that would have required running. *Why did I run? Why didn't I stay and try to explain?* Because they'd seen me beside Katherine's body with that bloody knife in my hand and heard Dakota saying, *Do you believe it? Of all the people?*

Of course they'd believe it. After all, two years ago my older brother, Sebastian, made national news by bludgeoning our father nearly to death with a two-by-four, leaving him brain damaged and mute and paralyzed from the neck down. What's so hard to believe? Like brother, like sister, right?

Into the inky stillness inside the playhouse comes the distant sound of sirens. Dread chills my veins. The police are coming. I can picture what's happening. Based on the phone calls from kids at the kegger, a code 11-41 has been issued. The boxy red-and-white ambulance is pulling out of its bay at the new emergency services headquarters. The sirens grow louder and closer. The police will be the first to arrive, and they'll hurry across the baseball field and into the woods with flashlights. The kids will show them Katherine's body behind the dugout and tell them

what they saw ... *Callie Carson kneeling beside the body with a knife in her hand...*

But the officers have a more urgent matter. One will check Katherine's vital signs while the other scrambles back to the patrol car for the medical kit. Maybe, having seen the body, they already know it's too late—only when a kid's life is involved, it's never too late. They have to try no matter what. Maybe she's still clinging to life. Maybe they can manage a miracle.

The officer with the medical kit returns. He and his partner make a valiant but vain attempt to revive Katherine. Moments later the ambulance crew arrives. The EMTs hurry in and take over. Now one of the officers gets on his radio to report the grim news. *Looks like a code 187 (homicide).*

They will tell the kids to step back but stay close. After all, there may be a homicidal maniac on the loose. By now the detectives have arrived and surveyed the murder scene. While one looks for clues, the other takes the names and addresses of witnesses to be interviewed first thing tomorrow morning, while memories are still fresh. Based on the initial information, a BOLO will be issued before long: "Be on the lookout for Callie Carson, age seventeen, four foot ten, roughly a hundred pounds, dressed in jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt."

And here I am, maybe a quarter of a mile away, quivering in the dark with no idea of what to do.

* * *

About a year ago, Katherine Remington-Day, the most popular girl in the grade, started to be nice to me, inviting me to sit at her table at lunch and do things with her and her friends after school. The Remingtons were the town's earliest residents. Katherine's ancestors had first come to Soundview in the early 1800s. In the town hall was a row of portraits of the mayors going back to the 1820s, and close to half a dozen had the last name Remington.

Katherine was a dynamo, maybe three inches taller than me, with a light brown pageboy haircut and mad-crazy amounts of energy. No one else was on more committees or involved in more school activities, even though she did avoid any position that required an election. When she made it clear that she wanted to be friends, I figured I was just a charity case to her. Sometimes, in a dark moment, I even wondered if she was using me to prove just how powerful and popular she was. Powerful enough that she could have the loser Callie Carson as a friend and still be the center of the social swirl.

But the reason didn't matter. I was desperate for distraction, for friends in school, for a little fun. My family had been irreparably fractured. I'd quit the cross-country team just when it looked like we had a chance to win the statewide championship. My boyfriend, Slade, was working long hours, sometimes on jobs out of town, and my best friend, Jeanie, had moved back to England. And out of nowhere, there was Katherine, offering me a lifeline. I had to believe that anyone in my situation would have leaped to take it.

CHAPTER 3

SUNDAY 12:08 A.M.

THE SIRENS HAVE STOPPED. By now Katherine's body has been photographed, and the murder weapon slid carefully into a small plastic bag to be examined at the police lab. The EMTs will transport the body to the morgue for autopsy. The detectives will leave, knowing that early in the morning they will return to inspect the scene of the crime in the daylight, and then interview the witnesses.

No, wait, something else will happen first. In fact, it could be happening right now. The doorbell at my house will ring. My mother, in bed, will open her eyes and groggily fumble for the light. Dulled and foggy-headed from sleeping pills and Merlot, she'll be uncertain whether the doorbell really rang or she only dreamt it. But the bell will ring again and now alarm will begin to creep into the outer edges of her thoughts as she wonders who has awakened

her at this hour. She will pull on her robe, but before she goes to see who is at the door, she will check on Dad to make sure he's still breathing, and she will peek into my bedroom to see if I'm home.

And when she sees that my bed is empty, her alarm will leap closer to panic.

A police officer, or perhaps a detective, will be at the door. At the sight of him, Mom will struggle to retain some semblance of calm. He will want to know if I'm home, and when she says no, he will want to know if she's heard from me tonight. Filled with foreboding, she will shake her head and ask, *Why, what's happened?* I don't know if the officer or detective will tell her about Katherine. But I do know that he will say that the police are looking for me and that my mother should be in touch with them as soon as she sees or hears from me.

Mom will ask why again. Now that I think of it, the police officer will probably tell her: there's been a murder.

Katherine was a snob and proud of it. She was judgmental and sometimes mean and cruel. She believed in good grammar and manners and was quick to correct your mistakes. Even though she herself was sort of plain, she was contemptuous of slovenly dress. Some people disliked her and some were afraid of her, but most agreed that she was a force in our school.

At first when she took me under her wing, it was a huge relief. Suddenly I'd gone from the bleakest, lowest

point ever to having something to look forward to every day. Sitting at lunch, listening to Katherine and the others gab, knowing I'd be invited to go to movies, the mall, and slumber parties. It almost seemed like a miracle.

The other thing is you can tell yourself you're a charity case without really believing it. And then the day comes when you forget. And you think you really do belong. Because you want to so badly.

"Go slap David Sloan in the face," Katherine told Mia Flom one day at lunch. Mia was one of the girls Katherine allowed to sit at the table, but at the far end. She was blonde and slightly chubby, and depending on how and when you saw her, sometimes she looked pretty and sometimes she didn't. She was a reporter for the school newspaper and had a flair for writing. As far as I could tell, she was a nice girl who most people liked. She easily could have had a group of friends who accepted and enjoyed her, but instead, she seemed absolutely determined to break into Katherine's group.

"Why?" Mia asked, clearly startled.

"Because I said so," replied Katherine, delivering the line dramatically and with inflection, as if she were an actress. Of course, she wasn't an actress. She would never put herself in a position where she could be judged or criticized.

The other girls had stopped talking. Within Katherine's crowd there seemed to be two subgroups—those who were close to Katherine and those who wished they