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Chapter 1

Blood

I don't remember any of the true, important parts, but there's this dream I have. Everything is cold and branches scrape the window screen. Giant trees, rattling, clattering with leaves. White rain gutter, the curtain flapping. Pansies, violets, sunflowers. I know the fabric pattern by heart. They're a list in my head, like a poem.

I dream about fields, dark tunnels, but nothing is clear. I dream that a dark shape puts me in the crib, puts a hand over my mouth, and whispers in my ear. *Shh*, it says. And, *Wait*. No one is there, no one is touching me, and when the wind comes in around the edges of the window frame, my skin is cold. I wake up feeling lonely, like the world is big and freezing and scary. Like I will never have anyone touch me again.

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They were sticking students in the cafeteria, over by the trophy cases.

They'd hung a curtain to hide the blood-draw station, and it came down almost to the floor, but everyone knew what was behind it. Needles going in, tubes coming out. A butcher-paper banner was stretched over the west entrance, announcing the blood drive in giant Magic Marker letters.

We'd just come in from lunch. Me, the Corbett twins, and Roswell Reed.

Drew Corbett was digging through his pockets for a quarter to show me how he could fix a coin toss. It sounded complicated, but he had a way of taking any trick or sleight of hand and making it look easy.

When he tossed the quarter, it hung for a second and I was sure I could see it flip over, but when he showed me the back of his hand, it was still heads. He smiled a wide, slow smile, like we'd just exchanged a really good joke without either of us saying anything out loud. Behind us, his brother Danny boy was in this ongoing argument with Roswell about whether or not the only local band that was any good could ever get radio play or score spots on late-night talk shows.

From far away, you could look at the twins and get the idea that they were the same person.

They had the same long, brown hands, the same narrow eyes and dark hair. They were good at the same things, drawing and building and fixing stuff, but Drew was more relaxed. He listened better and moved slower. Danny was the one who talked.

"But look at what sells," Roswell said, raking a hand through his hair so it stood up in messy tufts, rust colored. "What makes you think that the same people who get all frantic for power chords would even appreciate a rarified talent like Rasputin Sings the Blues?"

Danny sighed and grabbed my arm. "Mackie, would anybody really take something that fundamentally sucks over something good?" He sounded impatient, like he already knew he was winning this one whether I backed him or not, so why were they still talking about it?

I didn't answer. I was looking at Alice Harms, which was a habitual behavior, kind of like a hobby.

Danny yanked harder. "Mackie, quit acting like a complete stoner and *listen*. Do you really think someone would pick the bad thing?"

"People don't always know what they should want," I said without looking away from Alice.

She had on a green shirt, cut low so it showed the tops of her breasts. There was a yellow blood-donor sticker stuck to the front of it. She tucked her hair behind one ear and the whole thing was sort of beautiful.

Except, I could smell the blood—sweet, metallic. I could taste it in the back of my mouth and my stomach was starting to feel iffy. I'd forgotten all about the blood drive until I'd walked into school that morning and been greeted by the festival of hand-lettered signs.

Drew hit me hard on the shoulder. "Here comes your girlfriend."

Alice was crossing the cafeteria, flanked by two other members of the junior-class royalty, Jenna Porter and Stephanie Beecham. I could hear the scuff of their sneakers on the linoleum. The sound was nice and reminded me of shuffling through dead leaves. I watched Alice but not in any really hopeful way.

Girls went for Roswell, not me. He was tall and knobby, with a wide, straight mouth. He was freckled in the summer, the hair on his arms was reddish, and he never got his sideburns even, but he was likable. Or maybe it was just that he was like them.

I was the weird one—pale, creepy. Blond hair might have been a strong point on someone else, but on me, it just made it harder to get away with how dark my eyes were. I didn't make jokes or start conversations. Sometimes, people got uneasy just looking at me. It was better to stay in the background. But now here I was, standing in the middle of the cafeteria, and Alice was coming closer. Her mouth was pink. Her eyes were very blue.

And then she was right in front of me.

"Hi, Mackie."

I smiled, but it felt more like wincing. It was one thing to look at her from across a room and think about maybe, possibly kissing her. It was another to have a conversation. I swallowed and tried to come up with any of the normal things people talk about. All I could think was how once I'd seen her in her tennis uniform last spring and her legs were so tan I thought my heart would stop.

"So, did you give blood?" she said, touching her yellow sticker. "You better tell me you gave blood." When she pushed her hair back from her face, I caught a flash of something silver in her mouth. She had her tongue pierced.

I shook my head. "I can't do needles."

That made her laugh. Suddenly, her hand was resting on my arm for no good reason. "Aw, that's so *cute*! Okay, fine, you're off the hook for being a huge pansy. So, are your parents all completely freaked out about the latest drama? I mean, you heard about Tate Stewart's sister, right?"

Behind me, Roswell took a sharp breath and let it back out. The twins had stopped smiling. I fumbled around for a way to change the subject but couldn't come up with anything on the spot.

The smell of blood was sweet and oozy, too thick to ignore.

I had to clear my throat before I answered. "Yeah. My dad's been pretty cut up about it."

Alice opened her eyes very wide. "Oh God, do you actually *know* them?"

"His dad's doing the service," Danny said in a flat voice.

He and Drew had both turned away. When I followed their gaze, I saw they were watching Tate, who sat alone at one of the long tables, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the sky.

I *didn't* know her. I mean, I'd gone to school with her my whole life, and she lived down the block from Drew and Danny, and I'd had at least one class with her every semester since junior high. But I didn't *know* her. I didn't know her sister either, but I'd seen them together in the parking

lot at my dad's church. A chubby, smiling little kid named Natalie. Just this normal, healthy-looking kid.

Tate scraped back her chair and glanced in our direction. Her hair was dark brown and cut short, which made her face look strangely bare. From far away, she seemed small, but her shoulders were rigid as she stood up, like she was ready to take a punch. Until two days ago, she'd had friends. Maybe not the whispering, giggling, inseparable kind like Alice, but people had liked her.

Now there was an empty space around her that made me think of quarantine. It was unsettling to realize that it didn't take much to make you an outcast. All you needed was for something terrible to happen.

Alice didn't waste any time on Tate. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and suddenly, she was standing much closer to me. "Just, you never think about little kids dying. I mean, that's so sad, right? My mom's kind of been going crazy with the saints medals and the Hail Marys since she heard. Hey, are you guys going to be around on Saturday? Stephanie's having a party."

Roswell leaned in over my shoulder. "Cool. We might stop by. So you guys got suckered into the blood drive, huh?" He was looking at Stephanie when he said it. "How was exsanguination? Did it hurt?"

Stephanie and Jenna both started to nod, but Alice rolled her eyes. "Not really. Like, it hurt when she was putting the tube in—but it wasn't bad. It actually hurts more now. When she pulled the needle out, it kind of tore and now it won't quit bleeding. Look."

She held out her arm. There was a cotton ball taped to the inside of her elbow, covering the needle mark. In the middle, starting under the tape and spreading out through the cotton, there was a red splotch that grew and grew.

Iron is everywhere. It's in cars, kitchen appliances, and those big industrial machines they use to pack food, but most of it's mixed with other things, carbon and chromium and nickel. It hurts in a slow, exhausting way. I can take it.

The blood iron was different. It roared up through my mouth and nose, getting in my throat. Suddenly, it was hard to focus. My heart was beating very fast and then too, too slow.

"Mackie?" Alice's voice sounded thin and fuzzy, coming from far away.

"I have to go," I said. "My locker . . . I forgot this thing and I need to . . ."

For a second, I thought one or two or maybe all of them were going to follow me. Alice started to reach for me. Then Roswell put his hand on her arm and she stopped. His expression was tight, like he was pressing his lips together to keep from saying something. He jerked his head in the direction of the hall, just barely. *Just go.*

I made it through the maze of tables and out of the cafeteria without stumbling, but my vision was starting to tunnel and I could feel my heartbeat in my hands and in my ears. It was better once I got away from the sweet, suffocating smell of the blood drive. I took deep breaths and waited for the dizziness to ebb off.

The lockers in the junior hall all looked the same—five feet tall and painted a light, flaking beige. Mine was at the far end, past the hall to the math wing and the doors out to the courtyard. As soon as I came around the corner, I knew something was wrong with it.

On the locker door, at eye level, there was a red smear the size and shape of someone's palm. Even before I got close, I could smell the blood. It wasn't as bad as Alice's puncture wound. That had been warm, horribly metallic. This was cold and sticky, just starting to dry.

I looked around, but the hall was empty. The doors leading out to the courtyard were closed. It had been raining all day and there was no one on the grass.

The smear was a dark, gummy red, and I stood with my hands against my forehead. It was a joke, some kind of mean, stupid trick. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to come up with it—you wouldn't have to guess. I am notorious for being the guy sitting on the ground with my head between my knees when someone gets a bloody nose.

It was a joke because it *had* to be. But even before I moved closer, I knew deep down that it wasn't. Someone had gotten creative with a paper clip or a key. They'd scratched the word *Freak* into the congealing mess.

I took my sleeve and scrubbed at it, feeling sick and out of breath. I got most of the blood off, but *Freak* stayed right there on the door. It was scratched into the paint and blood had settled into the letters so the word stood out dark against the beige enamel. Looking at it made the rush of static sweep in again. I backed away and almost fell. There was just my slow, stuttering heartbeat.

Then my hand on the wall, feeling for the door, the empty courtyard, the fresh air.

***

I was in kindergarten the first time my dad told me about Kellan Caury.

The story was short, and he told it over and over, like *Winnie-the-Pooh* or *Goodnight Moon*. When my dad told it, I could see the important parts like scenes from an old movie, flickering and grainy. Kellan Caury would be quiet and polite. A grown-up, maybe in his thirties.

He was like me. Mostly. Except that he had an extra set of joints in his fingers and I always pictured him in black and white.

He ran a music repair shop on Hanover Street and lived above it in a little kitchenette apartment. He couldn't tune pianos because he couldn't stand to touch the steel wires, but he was honest and fair and everyone liked him. His specialty was fixing violins.

When kids started to go missing, no one thought that much about it. It was the Depression, and no one had enough food or enough money, and kids were always disappearing. They got sick or ran away, or died from accidents or starvation, and that was too bad, but no one really got suspicious or asked that many questions.

Then the sheriff's daughter disappeared. This was in 1931, just before the end of October.

Kellan Caury had never hurt anyone, but it didn't matter. They came for him anyway.

They dragged him out of his little kitchenette apartment and down into the street. They burned out his shop and beat on him with wrenches and pipes. Then they hung him from a tree in the oak grove at the end of Heath Road with a bag over his head and his hands tied behind his back. They left his body there for a month.

The first time my dad told me this, I didn't get what he was trying to say, but by the time I was in first or second grade, I was already starting to understand.

The moral of the story is, don't attract attention. Don't have deformed fingers. Don't let anyone find out how amazing you are at tuning strings by ear. Don't show anyone the true, honest heart of yourself or else, when something goes wrong, you might wind up rotting in a tree.

Everyone has a point of origin. A place they come from.

Some people's places are just simpler than others'.

I don't remember any of this, but my sister, Emma, swears it's true and I believe her. This is

the story she used to tell me at night, when I would climb out of bed and sneak down the hall to her room.

The baby in the crib: crying, in that anxious, fussy way. His face is shiny between the bars. The man comes in the window—bony, wearing a black coat—and grabs the baby up. He slips back out over the sill, slides the window down, pops the screen back in. Is gone. There's something else in the crib.

In the story, Emma's four years old. She gets out of bed and pads across the floor in her footie pajamas. When she reaches her hand between the bars, the thing in the crib moves closer. It tries to bite her and she takes her hand out again but doesn't back away. They spend all night looking at each other in the dark. In the morning, the thing is still crouched on the lamb-and-duckling mattress pad, staring at her. It isn't her brother.

It's me.