

THE CHILDREN OF BLACK VALLEY

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Release Date: Summer, 2008.

Bleak House Books.

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The dog barked the entire time Daniel was in the shower. He was dressed and midway through wedging his spelling book into his backpack before he realized the noise had stopped. Perched on the edge of his desk, he paused and listened.

From his bedroom, the only sound he could hear was the central air. It made the papers under his bed rustle when it first came on.

His room was small. In the original plan, it had been twice its size, but developers had split it in half, and Dad wouldn't let anyone through the adjoining door. Thirteen years later, that side still belonged to Riley.

"Ralphie?" Daniel edged out into the hallway. His feet were still wet from the shower, clammy inside his shoes and socks. "Ralphie, c'mere boy."

The dog was trained to come running when Daniel called him.

This time—nothing. Not a sound from the first floor.

It was Daniel's secret that he could see the front door in the reflections of the framed photographs, stair-stepped over the curling banister.

There was no motion downstairs.

He glanced to his father's bedroom, at the end of the hall. Already at work. Just like always.

Daniel shrugged into a basketball jersey as he descended, padding down the wall-to-wall carpet. He stopped short when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Ralphie was sprawled on the polished hardwood floor, right next to the coat rack.

He was dead.

The man with the hammer standing over him was a stranger.

Their eyes locked.

“Daniel Mackie,” the man said.

Daniel ran.

He made it to the kitchen before the man caught up with him. Daniel grabbed at the back door and fumbled with the latch. A streak of color barreled toward him in the reflection of the window.

Daniel dodged, and the man’s arms upset the precarious pile of dishes Dad had been saving for Friday.

Pots, pans, breakfast bowls, forks—everything rained to the floor with a thundering *crash*.

The man pivoted. He lashed out with one hand and clamped around Daniel’s wrist. Daniel yelped and kicked at somewhere around the man’s stomach.

For a split-second, he was free.

Pounding back upstairs as fast as his legs would carry him, Daniel gasped for breath.

He couldn’t think.

Left, right—Dad’s bedroom? His own?

The bathroom. Lockable.

He almost made it. Three more steps, a split-second earlier, and he would have been in the clear.

The man’s arms close around his, halfway through the door shoulders. “Jesus Christ, kid!” His voice was like grinding machinery.

Daniel couldn’t move. He heard a *pop*, something plastic, and then there was a sharp jab at the back of his neck. It stung, like the time he’d accidentally stepped on a bee in the grass out at baseball.

Daniel squirmed.

“Hold on,” the man said. “Just hold on, kid.”

The doorbell rang.

The man’s hands tightened. He shoved Daniel to the floor and ducked behind the banisters that overlooked the entryway.

In the reflections of the framed photographs—Daniel and Dad, Mom and Daniel, Dad and Riley, nothing of them all together—Daniel could see the door opening. The man hadn't closed it all the way.

There was a muffled exclamation. Someone finding Ralphie's body. "Oh my—Hello? Anyone home?"

The man's fingers crept their way up Daniel's collarbone, searching for his mouth. Daniel had too scared to remember to shout.

"Up here!"

Downstairs, a shape jerked—brown, a collar, shorts and black shoes. A deliveryman. Ralphie's killer lunged and tried to get his knee onto Daniel's back.

Daniel twisted around and rolled out from under him. He slammed into the open doorway around the stairwell and tumbled down a couple of steps before he found his footing.

Large brown eyes stared up at Daniel from below. "Oh...hi...sorry to walk in." A hesitant smile. The man read the label on the package he was holding. "You wouldn't be *Daniel the Birthday Boy*, would you?"

A squeal of brakes sounded from the street. Sunlight caught the curving yellow roof of the school bus.

Daniel glanced over his shoulder at the man plastered against the wall in the upstairs hallway. He had a big forehead, buzzed gray hair, tanned skin like leather, and eyes like drops of coal. Slowly, he shook his head at Daniel.

"Kid?" The UPS man's polished black shoe touched Ralphie's spine.

Daniel leapt down the stairs, three at a time, and bolted out the door. He made it to the bus without looking back.

All of the kids stared at him as he climbed aboard. He was panting, sweating, out of breath. There was a long, nasty rug burn on his right forearm. For a couple of seconds, he stood in the middle of the aisle, wavering.

The driver gave him a nudge. "Can't go 'till you siddown. C'mon."

Daniel sank into a seat. He couldn't make himself look out the smudged window at his house.

“Who’s that man, Danny?” It was Megan. Once, she’d been an almost-girlfriend. They’d even kissed. Her head popped up over the seatback behind him. “Who’s that man coming out of your house?”

Daniel only sank lower and squeezed his eyes shut.



During the three-minute passing period between classes, Daniel went to the office and asked to use the phone. He stood over it, receiver to his ear, listening to the dial tone. Dad wouldn’t answer, anyway. He turned his cell phone off the minute he arrived at work, but he would be pissed if Daniel called Mom.

They weren’t talking to each other again. Daniel never really understood it.

“Something wrong, hon?” The woman at the front desk was the kind of person who cooed at babies in grocery stores.

Daniel opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“If it ain’t an emergency, you shouldn’t be playing with the phone. What room’re you in, fourth period?”

Daniel hung up and went back to class.

He got in trouble from every one of his teachers for not having his books or his homework. A couple of his friends from the basketball team asked him what had happened. He couldn’t figure out what to say.

In history, they had just gotten to the Cold War—the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy, the Bay of Pigs. The teacher was lecturing about a weapons lobbyist named Ralph when Daniel burst into tears. *Ralphie*.

At lunch, on the playground, Kyle and Walt made fun of him. They were in eighth grade, but Daniel broke Kyle’s nose without a thought. After he hit the ground, Daniel couldn’t stop. He just kept kicking and swinging until there was blood everywhere.

He felt numb all over.

Two playground guards pulled him off. He was panting and his ears were ringing, and he couldn’t really hear what they were saying to him. A bead of something wet rolled down the back of his neck where the strange man had jabbed him. Daniel closed his eyes and wished that all of this would turn out to be a dream.