The Stone Catchers

a novel

Laura Leigh Morris

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"You're scaring the kids," Frank said. "You're scaring me too."

It was the middle of the night. They lay as far apart as they could, staring at the ceiling, never once glancing at each other. "That makes sense," she said.

"What?"

She looked over at him. How could he not know? But he didn't look at her. "I killed someone."

She had expected it to take longer before he realized she couldn't be trusted with the kids. But she'd adjust. Frank would have to adjust too—Donetta woke the kids each morning, got them dressed, drove Lily Jane to daycare and Travis to school. She planned their weekend outings—packed sunscreen and extra goggles when they went to the Brickton Pool, scheduled trips to the natural history museum in Pittsburgh when they had special dinosaur exhibits, planned tea parties for Lily Jane. Frank was a good dad, but his job mostly involved showing up where Donetta told him to. He'd never think to make sure Travis had the right outfit for themed days at school. Or to plan play dates with the other moms at daycare. Donetta thought like a mom, had been a mom to her core, except now she was—what? Something else. She wasn't sure what.

"That's not what I meant." Frank pushed himself up on one elbow, looked down at her. "I meant how you're acting. All twitchy."

"You should be afraid I'll hurt the kids." Donetta continued to stare at the popcorn ceiling, wished she could cry, but the tears wouldn't come.

"Do you want to hurt the kids?" He sounded nervous.

"No, but I could."

"So could I."

She shook her head. "That's not the same." He didn't yet know about the marks on the killer's face, his flesh under her nails. Eventually, someone would leak the details to the news. Then Frank would look at her differently, wouldn't trust her with the kids. He would understand.

Frank sighed. He lay back down. "You've been staring at the damn TV all day. Have you listened to a word anyone's said?"

She'd heard "Wayne William Buckley" and "Sutter Alastair Smith" clear as day, but everything else was muddled. "When I look at the kids, they're full of bullet holes and covered in blood."

Frank swallowed loudly. "You're still processing."

"I don't want to touch them," she said. "I can't touch them." She rolled on her side, toward Frank. He turned to her. "I don't want to hurt them," she whispered. "I don't want to touch you either."

"I know," he said.

"I'm a killer," she said.

"You're a hero," he whispered.

She blinked, shook her head, turned on her back again.

"Some students in your class said you and the others saved them all," Frank said. "They told this lady reporter. Rita? Vita?"

"Vera Babcock."

He snapped his fingers. She jumped. "That's it. She said you were her teacher once. Called you a hero. Everyone's calling you a hero. They might give you a medal."

"I don't want a medal." Donetta pressed her palms against her thighs, tried to push her nails into the skin, to feel the pain, remembered her nails were gone. The meaty tips of her fingers throbbed with the pressure. She pushed harder. Frank didn't understand. He'd been in his truck, wasn't even on campus when the shooting happened.

"Hero," Frank whispered.

"Shut up," she said.

He repeated himself, and she screamed at him. He didn't say it again.

"I lost a friend and two students today," she whispered. "So far."

"Who?" Frank asked.

"Belda White," she said.

"You've never mentioned her."

"I don't tell you everyone I know." She tried to keep the annoyance out of her voice.

"Who else?"

"Sutter Smith," she said. "He was in the classroom."

"Your students said he sacrificed himself for you."

She stared at the ceiling. "He did."

He grabbed her hand, seemed to remember, let go. "Who else?"

"Wayne Buckley. I was mad when he didn't show up for class. I remember thinking today's interviews were too important to miss, that he'd better be dead."

"Wayne Buckley was your student?" Frank swallowed, an audible gulp, cupped her cheek with his hand. Donetta tried to pull away, but he held her there, looked in her eye. "Wayne Buckley was the shooter."

"What?" She sat up, shook her head. "No."

"That's what the news said."

"You're wrong." She lay back again, her breath coming in pants. "They called him a victim."

"That was a mistake. They said so later."

"He was my student. I'd know if I killed my own student."

"Shit," Frank whispered.

She waited for more, but maybe there was nothing else to say. Donetta stared at the popcorn ceiling. Wayne couldn't be the shooter. She'd have known if her student was planning mass murder. Except—

Shit. Shit. Shit. She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, felt like she might puke, leaned forward just in case. Two weeks ago, Wayne had turned in a response paper about his group. He'd complained that they were never prepared, that he was doing all the work. At the end of the paper, he'd written, "You need to talk to them. If I do it, I'll bring a gun along."

But it was a joke. At least that's how she read it. It wasn't even a threat. More a sick joke. She hadn't ignored it completely. No, she'd kept him after class last week, had told him it was never okay to write something like that. "If I were someone else, I'd take this to the dean," she'd said, "and he might kick you out." Wayne hadn't said much, had mumbled a *thank you*. She'd kept the paper, knew you never wanted to get rid of something like that. And now that paper was sitting on her desk, waiting for someone to find it. And ask why she hadn't taken it to the dean. They had to point a finger somewhere.

Except she couldn't be the only one who should have known. His parents had to have suspected something was wrong with their son. Parents always knew.

Like she'd known Travis was sick this morning. When vomit had splattered the floor, Donetta rubbed his back, knew she should cancel

class. She'd waited to see if he would vomit again and thought of all the work she'd have to do to reschedule the visit with the Swigers. Besides, she'd been planning to meet up with Miller afterward. She'd made a deal with herself: if Travis didn't throw up again, she'd take him to school. And she had. She hadn't canceled class. She should have canceled class. She was a mother, and mothers knew when something was wrong.

Frank leaned toward her, peering into her face. "Donnie?" That worried crinkle between his eyes. "What's wrong, Donnie?"

"Nothing." She wondered how long before someone came looking for Wayne's schoolwork. Not today. Not even this week, probably. Besides, they'd have to sort through her office, find it in a pile of other papers. She wouldn't help them. She wasn't going back in that place. Not ever. "I'm fine," Donetta said and lay back, staring at the popcorn ceiling. "Totally fine."