

LOVE, SEX & MURDER SHOWS

Kelly Banks

PAPER ★ STREET

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This book is dedicated to

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Murder Show

EMILY WAS WATCHING A murder show when her doorbell rang. Her hand froze inside a party size bag of Doritos. She wasn't expecting anyone. On screen, a man dressed as a clown was stabbing a screaming prostitute. Belatedly, she pressed the pause button. It always seemed to be a prostitute, she thought. Miracle there were any left. She sucked the flavoring from each of her fingers, then made her way to the door and looked through the peephole. A woman stood in the hallway, her head a mess of wild blonde hair.

Callie Davenport, her best friend in high school.

She opened the door and Callie smiled.

"Hello, boo."

Emily smiled back "Hi."

"I didn't know if you still lived here. Just kind of winged it, you know?"

She hadn't seen Callie for almost two years, not even on social media. It was as if they'd fallen out, but nothing had happened. Some people were like that, they didn't fall out with you, they put you in the freezer to be thawed out at a later date.

"Are those pajamas?"

Emily felt her face go red. It was 9 o'clock on a Friday night and she was already dressed for bed. She saw herself clearly through her friend's eyes and it crushed her. She hung her head and saw a suitcase at her friend's feet.

"Are you going somewhere?"

Callie started crying uncontrollably.

"Frank threw me out. You have to help me, I've nowhere else to go. It'll only be for a couple of days, I promise."

Emily would've groaned except for the fact that her arms were now wrapped around Callie in a till-death bear hug. She was a slave to her emotions, it was probably the reason she was so fascinated by serial killers, that they all seemed so disconnected from theirs.

"Of course you can stay, but this isn't exactly the Ritz."

"I just need somewhere safe until I can get my own place."

Callie paused, looking at the image frozen on the TV screen.

"Maybe we can help each other, you know?"

Emily ignored that and walked into the kitchen.

"You still drink gin and tonic?"

"Like a goddamn fish."

She pulled out a couple of glasses and poured the drinks. The tonic was a little flat, but it'd do the job. She held a glass out to Callie who took it and immediately drank from it. Her friend closed her eyes and smiled a kooky smile like she was being transported by a single mouthful of alcohol. Callie Davenport was the kind of beautiful that made girls want to please her for no other reason than to keep her close. The fact that she was an old friend made no difference to Emily.

There's a beautiful woman standing in my kitchen.

They stood in the kitchen drinking and making awkward small talk for about half an hour before they sat down in

front of the TV. On screen, the woman was still in the middle of being murdered, a look of terror frozen on her face. In the corner of the screen it said RECONSTRUCTION. This always bothered Emily. Either the producers assumed the audience would think there'd been a film crew at the scene during the original murder, or else that *another* hooker had been murdered to make the show. It kind of pulled her out of the moment seeing that word on screen, when all she wanted was to be right there with the death.

"You can put it back on. You must be *dying* to see what happens."

She rolled her eyes at Callie.

"Maybe we could watch something else."

"This is your home, boo. I don't want to impose on you in any way, and that includes what you want to watch on TV. Now, get me up to speed; who's the brunette, and who's this fat dude with the knife?"

"He's a factory worker and part-time clown, she's a prostitute. He, uh, likes killing prostitutes and dumping them in woodland."

Callie shrugged. "Who doesn't?"

Emily smiled and pressed play. The room filled with screaming and the hand with the knife came down over and over, stabbing the woman until she lay still on the dark, concrete floor, blood pooling out. The scene seemed more gruesome than usual for a reconstruction, but things had a way of feeling different when you were with someone.

The man picked up the woman's body like she weighed no more than a cat, and carried her toward his truck.

"Question," Callie said. "Are we on the side of the killer here?"

"I find these shows kind of cathartic after a week at work. I like to imagine my supervisor is the one getting buried in a hole, or dismembered, or whatever. Although, when a woman's being strangled..."

She didn't finish, she couldn't.

"You imagine it's you."

"Yeah."

"Do you like being strangled?"

She turned toward Callie.

"That would be weird, wouldn't it?"

"Would it?"

"Have you ever been strangled. Choked, whatever?"

"Sure."

"You like it?"

"Not at all, but there's no judgement here."

Emily realized that she was disappointed.

"It was just one time. A guy did it without asking and I just about broke the bed in half."

Callie looked at her with a level gaze and said nothing.

"I don't know why I said that to you."

"Because I'm your friend and you can say anything to me."

On screen, the factory worker was driving his pickup truck to dump the woman's body. The man looked pretty pleased with himself, his face was all lit up. Meanwhile, through the rear window the tarpaulin moved and the woman crawled out.

"Jesus," Emily said. "She's still alive."

"Is she though? Wasn't she already dead inside?"

Emily smiled. "I've missed you so much."

Callie reached her hand out between them and gave her thigh a squeeze.

"I missed you too, baby."

Her hand was warm and had a pleasant weight. After she stopped squeezing, her friend left it on her leg for the rest of the show. Callie had always been a tactile person, and it didn't seem like too much had changed since they'd last met. The show continued until the clown got what was coming to him, and then she shut off the television. The ending to all the murder shows she watched was pretty much the same, and was always the most boring part. She didn't care anything at all about how the killer got caught, or how the cops who put in the hours tracked the person down. She liked the beginning, when the killers found out who they really were, and what made them tick.

"So, you going to tell me what happened between you and Frank?"

"Nope."

Emily said nothing for a moment and they both stared at the blank TV screen.

"Did he hit you?"

"All the damn time."

"I'm sorry, Cal. You can stay here as long as you want."

Pancakes

EMILY WOKE WITH THE smell of coffee in the air. She scrunched up her nose and rubbed her temples as she stared at the ceiling. In the next room, through her open bedroom door, she could hear Callie Davenport singing to herself. Emily concentrated on the words, trying to place it. *Sunshine on a Rainy Day*. She smiled. The song brought out her friend's normally dormant English accent. It wasn't the worst version of the song she'd ever heard. Callie could sing. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand and saw it was already 10:30.

Emily sighed and swung her legs down onto the floor.

Sleeping late on a Saturday wasn't normally part of her routine, hadn't been for years. The extra time in bed never made her feel any more rested, often the reverse seemed to be true. She stood and stretched, then padded barefoot to the kitchen and sat on one of her barstools. Callie had her back to her and was cooking something on her hob. After a moment the song died on Callie's lips and she froze up.

"You're standing behind me, aren't you?"

"Sitting, actually."

Callie looked back over her shoulder.

"Sorry."

“For what?”

“I sing when I’m happy. That’s who I am.”

“And you stop when I’m close, that’s nice, Cal. Real subtle.”

Smoke started to rise behind her.

“That’s not what-”

“You’re on fire.”

Callie turned and worked the hob for a second then dumped some slightly burned pancakes onto a plate, put it on the counter between them and squirted some honey over the top and down the sides. Callie put her elbows down on the breakfast bar, her right arm overlapping her left and leaned forward so that her breasts pushed against the thin fabric of her T-shirt. Emily looked at the plate of pancakes, then briefly at Callie’s nipples pressing darkly through the thin white cotton shirt. She looked up.

“Help yourself, Em. I made them for you.”

Emily reached for the top pancake. Callie’s nipples were rock hard, they were like two fingers pointing straight at her. She took a pancake and began to eat. It was really good.

“You’ve got a beautiful voice, Callie. Never stop singing on my account.”

Her friend’s face turned scarlet.

“Thanks.”

“I’m glad you’re happy. Now eat, help me with these.”

Callie rolled up a pancake into a sausage shape and took a bite.

There was a smile frozen on Emily’s face, it was all she could do to stop herself from laughing. Callie’s nipples were still hard and she couldn’t take her eyes off them. It made her feel funny inside. It didn’t seem that cold to her and she wasn’t wearing any more than Callie. T-shirt and briefs. Emily took

another bite of the pancake. Of course, she didn't know for a *fact* that her friend was wearing briefs under her T-shirt, she just assumed.

"What's funny?"

"You," Emily said, and laughed.

After they ate and showered, they spent the next couple of hours catching up, mostly talking about people from school who had been friends; then about some other people from school that had been douches or bitches.

Eventually, conversation between them ran out. It was obvious to Emily that the problem was that Callie didn't want to talk about her recent history, or specifically, about her violent husband, Frank. She decided not to bring it up. Obviously, they'd have to talk about him at some point because it was going to be the only way for Callie to move on, but she thought the best way of dealing with it was probably when they'd had a couple of drinks.

"I'd forgotten just how beautiful you are."

Emily glanced at Callie to see if she was pulling her leg.

"Yeah. I forget sometimes myself."

"I know you do."

Emily smiled awkwardly.

"I don't know where you're going with this."

"I was just thinking about those people from school we were talking about. Looking at the totals, you know? It's not good. One murdered, two suicides, four dead in car crashes, twelve in the military, for a total of nineteen dead. That's a lot. Then we have two in prison, one in rehab, and one working a cosmetics counter in a mall."

Emily smiled at the way the last one somehow fitted on the same list. Taylor Beck, it was what she deserved.

"*Okay.*"

“And I just thought, I don’t know if anyone’s told you recently.”

“What?”

“That you’re beautiful.”

“Oh Jesus! Stop saying that, it’s weird.”

“We could be dead tomorrow, I want you to know.”

“Well you’re beautiful too, Cal.”

Callie smiled. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“I guess not.”

There was a long pause.

“So what am I going to say next?”

Inwardly, Emily sighed. She knew what was coming next and she didn’t really want to hear it. A friend had done this to her once before, while they were drunk, and her skin still crawled when she thought about it.

“That you love me?”

Callie frowned.

“*Obviously* I love you. I was going to say, don’t fucking die, I’d miss you.”

Emily turned, looking out the window and down at the street.

“You were gone for two years. Didn’t you miss me then?”

“It’s not the same. I was afraid for my life most of that time. Trust me, when you’re terrified everything but survival goes out the window. You can’t imagine what it’s like until you’ve lived it. This morning I saw you sleeping and you had a little bit of drool hanging out your mouth. I can’t explain it, but my heart just exploded. You lying there sleeping made me happier than Frank ever did. I felt *connected* to you and I just started singing. I was so happy to be back in your life.”

Tears were running down Callie's face, but she didn't seem sad. They seemed to be tears of relief, of happiness. Emily wrapped her arms around her and held her tight.

"I love you too, Cal. But if you tell anyone, I'll kill you."

Callie Davenport laughed inside her embrace.

When the hug ended Emily was surprised to realize that she'd been enjoying it. Before Callie's return the day before, nobody had hugged her for almost a year. The last guy she'd dated had never hugged her. Not once. How was that possible?

"What are we doing tonight?"

Emily frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Saturday night, you know? You get dressed up, you go out, have a few drinks, have some fun. Is this ringing a bell at all?"

Right. The thought of going out and having fun drained her of more energy than a two-hour run. She felt her shoulders drop. Callie's eyes narrowed.

"You don't watch murder porn on Saturday as well do you?"

Emily laughed, she'd never thought of it as *pornography* before.

"I guess it's been a while since I was going out regularly."

"Watching hookers being murdered is not a life, boo."

Emily nodded. It was something she'd thought about many times. Because of one guy, she'd retreated inside herself. It was the safe option, because most guys turned out to be assholes within a very short period of time. On the other hand, she didn't miss going to bars and clubs, or the drain on her checking account that went along with it.

"I don't *just* watch murder shows, I watch cop shows as well."

"Oh yeah? What's the difference?"

"Between true crime and fiction?"

"You know what I mean. It's all murder."

Emily tilted her head over, her eyes going up and to the left as she thought about it.

"Victimology and production values mostly."

"Victimology, huh? Girl, I arrived just in time."

Maybe it was true, Emily thought.

She'd never find the energy and confidence to go out on her own, or on dates. Friends had fallen away and stopped contacting her. Between her job, looking at social media, and her fitness regime, murder shows was about all she had time for recently. Friends required time in real life and she just hadn't made that time. When each weekend rolled around all she wanted to do was sit on her ass, drink alcohol, and eat big bags of chips. Callie was offering her an opportunity to break the cycle she'd fallen into and she should grab it with both hands, because if she didn't, how was it ever going to stop? One day she'd wake up, and her life would have passed her by. She'd be old, and no one would want to spend time with her.

"All right," she said. "But just bars. I need to work myself up to a club."

"You bet."

"I don't want to be a bitch, Cal, but I don't want you bringing guys back here, ok?"

Callie's mouth dropped open in shock.

"I just got rid of the Devil, I'm in no rush to meet his brother."

"Okay."

"That was kind of funny. You sounded like my mother."

Emily shrugged. "All part of the service."