BLACK BROTHER, BLACK BROTHER

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Orion
Children's Books

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder & Stoughton
First published in the United States in 2020 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 51010 986 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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are made from wood from responsible sources.

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FSC® C104740

Orion Children's Book
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

Dedicated to
Phillip Mackert
a special reader

BLACK BROTHER, BLACK BROTHER

1
THE CRIME

BLACK BOY

I wish I were invisible. Wearing Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak or Frodo Baggins's Elvish ring. Whether shrouded in fabric or slipping on gold, it wouldn't matter to me. I'd be gone. Disappeared.

I stare at my hands. Nighttime dark. They have a life of their own. Clenching, unclenching. Fist then no fist. I keep my shoulders relaxed; my face, bland. My hands won't behave.

No science fiction or fantasy is going to help me. I live in a too-real world.

Sitting, I stare at the black specks on the white linoleum. A metaphor? That's what they're teaching me

in English. *Metaphor.* Except I won't believe I'm just a black speck. I'm bigger, more than that. Though sometimes I feel like I'm swimming in whiteness.

Most of the students at Middlefield Prep don't look like me.

They don't like me either.

I look up. The secretary, Mrs Kay, even the assistant headmaster, Mr Waters, with his tartan tie, avert their eyes. They've been staring, wondering:

How come he gets in so much trouble? Why can't he be good like his brother? Helpful? Obedient.

Under my breath, I curse. My stomach twists.

Be invisible.

My insides burn. Anger builds. This has nothing to do with me.

I'm not here. Donte is not here.

My right foot taps uncontrollably. If I sit any longer, I'll explode.

"Donte," Headmaster McGeary says warily.

I stand. "Sir." (Be cool, I tell myself.)

"It's 2:46 PM. Couldn't you have finished the day without getting in trouble?"

This isn't the way it's supposed to go down. He's supposed to call me into his office. Shut the door, talk privately with me.

Now he's scolding me in public.

The headmaster's eyelids are heavy, puffy. He's tired, but I'm tired, too. Every week, I'm punished for something I didn't do.

I clutch my left fist with my hand. It's still trying to move, open and shut. My right leg trembles.

Mr Waters smirks; the secretary's eyes show pity. Pity pushes me over the edge.

"I didn't do anything," I blurt. "Like the time before, and the time before that. And the time before that. I didn't do anything."

The two men grow taller, rigid. Bracing, readying to take me down. They don't like me too loud.

I exhale. My dad's been to war. Two tours. No matter what I do, I'm outflanked.

I quiet my voice, try to speak reasonably.

In my head, I hear: *Speak truth to power.* Mom's favorite phrase. Then, Dad adding, *Respectfully.*

I try to still my body. But I feel a trembling in my hands, up my spine.

The wall clock's minute hand clicks. 2:48 PM.

"I hate this school," I say softly, slowly, trying to make them understand.

"Hate no matter what goes wrong, I'm at fault. Some guy overturns a chair; it's my fault. My locker's broken into; my supplies scattered, dumped in the trash. My books ripped. I get detention. *And* a library fine."

My voice races, rises.

"In gym, playing ball, I get called for fouls all the time. But nobody is called when I'm fouled."

My hands clench, unclench.

"Everybody here bullies me. Teachers. Students. Whispers, sometimes outright shouts follow me. Seems like everybody has something bad to say: 'You dress thug.' 'Your dreads are dreadful.' Girls laugh and point at me. 'Why can't you be like your brother?'

‘Can your brother find you in the dark?’” I breathe. “It hurts. All of it.”

I stop. My stomach churns.

Three faces. Mr Waters is grim. Mrs Kay, embarrassed by my outburst, looks down, pulling her ear.

The headmaster’s cheeks flush, his eyes glare.

I’ve lit the fire. I need Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. Need to disappear, escape this bright office with its stacked trophy case and laminated Massachusetts map with a stenciled *#1* above two crossed swords.

Headmaster McGeary steps forward. “You don’t get to bring your New York behaviour here. You don’t get to yell at me or anyone else.”

“I didn’t yell at you.”

“Are you contradicting me?”

“No. Frustrated,” I say, exasperated. “You didn’t even ask me how I got here. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be in trouble.”

“You *are* in trouble.”

“Ask me what I did.”

He frowns.

"Ask me what I did," I insist.

Nothing.

The clock clicks another minute. The office door opens. Dylan, a classmate, stops, looks, walks backwards, then shuts the door. (Come back, I want to call.)

Nine minutes until school ends.

"I didn't do anything. Not ever. Not today."

"Seventh grade. Six more years at Middlefield. I suggest you learn to get along."

"I try to get along. Everyone's been against me since I started. Especially Alan. Today, he throws a pencil. It hits Samantha. I didn't throw it. Sam screams. Ms Wilson turns from the whiteboard and looks at me. *Me.* Nobody else.

"And now I'm here. You don't even ask me what happened. You don't care. You don't." I slap angrily at my tears.

Mrs Kay stands. Her eyes are kind. I think she might comfort me.

The headmaster waves her away, then sighs. "Why can't you be more like your brother?"

Fury, roiling spasms. It hurts to breathe. (Get control, I tell myself.)

I bend, trying to hide my pain. Quiet my hands.

"Your brother is a good boy."

(Keep it together.)

Five more minutes to go. Three o'clock. Not fair. Not fair. The words rattle in my head.

My backpack is on a chair. I pick it up.

I hate, hate this school. Hate our family moved. Hate how people treat me.

A murmur, then a roar: "I hate being me."

Disgusted, I swing my backpack. *Bam.* It slams at my feet.

"Call security," says Mr Waters.

Mrs Kay backs away. She's scared. Of me.

I cringe.

"No, the police," says Headmaster.

He's done with me.

The plan all along. Get me out of Middlefield Prep.

THE WALK

I'm not invisible. Worst time ever not to have a superpower.

School buses – not the yellow kind – are boarding. These buses are called "coaches". They even have Wi-Fi and TV screens built into the seats. Parents pick up kids in SUVs, Mercedes-Benzes, and Teslas. Some kids order Ubers, Lyfts. No bikes or skateboards here.

All students wear blue blazers with gold buttons. Each blazer has a badge with the initials *MP*, two swords making an *X*, and *Non Nobis Solum*.

Seeing me, flanked by cops, the crowd quiets.

Even though white plastic circles my wrists,

pulling my hands behind my back, tight, I keep my head high.

There are dozens of people. Might as well be hundreds. Folks are snapping pictures, recording videos. By evening, everyone will know the new kid – Donte Ellison – was arrested.

"Donte, Donte, what'd you do?"

I scowl.

"Get out of the way, kid," says the officer, his hand on my back, pushing me forward faster.

"He's my brother," answers Trey.

Bewildered, the officer stops, studies Trey. "You have a black brother?"

Quick, like lightning, Alan repeats, "Black brother, black brother."

I wince.

The officer opens the car door. My head is pushed down, and my body follows, collapsing, folding into the patrol car. The other officer gets behind the wheel.

"What'd you do?" Trey's yell penetrates the glass.

I turn from my brother's face. He should know I didn't do anything.

The second officer gets in the car. Steel mesh and

unbreakable glass separate the front seat from the back. I'm sitting on hard vinyl. There aren't any handles to unlock the back doors.

"I'm sorry. Donte. I'm sorry." My brother taps the window, trying to get me to look at him. "I know you didn't do anything. Didn't do a thing."

"Hey," shouts the cop, rolling down his window. "Son, you don't want to get involved in this."

Trey stops tapping. I look at him. Miserable, he stands, looking lost, on the kerb.

Even if my hands were untied, there's no tab for me to lower the window. I could shout, "It's OK. It's OK." Though I'd be lying.

I don't want Trey to feel bad, but I *do* want him to feel bad. I keep quiet.

The car moves. Students swarm behind my brother. Some even run behind the police car as it slowly navigates past gawking people, parked and stopped cars, and limo coaches.

"Don't want to hurt anybody," the nondriving officer says.

Alan slaps the window.

"Get away, kid," the second officer shouts.

I turn away. Alan slaps the window again to make me look at him. (As if he knows no policeman will ever arrest him.)

"Hey. Black brother."

Trey dashes forward, shoving him away. But the damage is done.

Pumping a fist, Alan leads his fencing crew. "Black brother, black brother." Louder, then louder still. They jog on either side of the patrol car.

Head low, hands cuffed, I can't escape. Nowhere to hide.

Day one, Alan made school miserable for me. "King Alan," they call him. Captain of the fencing team. He says "black" like a slur. Says it real nasty. Like a worse word. A word he thinks but doesn't dare say.

When he met Trey, he laughed, pointing at me, mocking. "Black brother. Black brother."

My new nickname. The whole school seemed to whisper it. Or else thought it.

Funny, how with two words, Alan made it easier

for kids to exclude me. If I sat in the cafeteria, students moved. No one invited me to a study group. Or offered to be friends. No one even wanted to talk with me.

Alan, the cool kid, had drawn a line, and sucking up to him, everyone turned against me.

"Let's go," says the cop. The car picks up speed down the long, tree-lined driveway. Alan and his teammates can't keep pace. Some hunch, catching their breath. Others hold their sides.

I twist around, seeing the gossiping crowd, the swarm of cars, hearing, "Black brother, black brother . . . Black brother, black brother." (A warped singsong.)

Alan waves goodbye.

The headmaster stands beneath two flapping flags: the American Stars and Stripes and Middlefield Prep's blue-and-gold sword insignia. Trey stands on the grassy area that shapes the circular roundabout. He must be cold. Like me, he isn't wearing a coat. Arms crossed about his chest, blank-faced, he keeps staring at the departing car. Danny, Alan's lieutenant, taunts him. Shouts – *what?* – in Trey's ear.

Trey keeps watching. Trying to see my face in the car's rear window.

I turn, stare at the traffic, the back of the cops' heads.

Black brother, black brother . . . black brother, black brother. The patrol car is beyond school sight. Beyond sound. But the chant still chases me.

It starts to snow.

Crying, my chin touches my chest.

Black is not invisible.