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Body Count

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Published by MIRA Books

Extract

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PROLOGUE

Twenty-five years ago

The house is quiet. It's 3:00 a.m.

The sleeping figure of a young girl takes up a small section of a single bed. She's on her side, curled in a ball, with Paddington Bear standing watch from the corner of her bed. A desk lamp lights the room, and light also emanates from the hallway to guide her way to the bathroom during her usual nightly excursion.

She tosses, ending up on her back. A small whimper escapes her lips. She's having one of her nightmares.

"No. Please no."

She moans. Her breathing quickens. She whimpers again. Her heart is racing. She thrashes her legs and the covers become untucked from the sides of the bed.

The boy in her dream is running, but someone's behind him. The man is gaining on the boy. "Watch out," she says, barely audible. She must save the boy.

Her breathing becomes labored. She gasps for air.

She sits bolt upright and screams. But not even the sound of her own screams can wake her. The nightmare is too intense, too real.

Down the corridor, her mother wakes up. Immediately she realizes her daughter is screaming. Another nightmare. She grabs her robe and drapes it across herself as she runs down the hall.

She throws her arms around her still-screaming child and rocks her back and forth. The screaming stops and the girl wakes up.

"Mom? John. Where's John?"

"It's all right, sweetie. It's just a dream."

"Where's John?" she shouts.

"Okay, okay, honey." The woman picks up her daughter and walks into the corridor, then into John's room. They stand at his doorway.

"What's up?" John says, more asleep than awake.

"See, sweetie, he's in bed. He's fine."

"Oh, another nightmare," John says, turning on his side and burrowing into his bed.

The woman puts her daughter back into bed. She glances at the bedside table, noticing an Agatha Christie book. "Sweetie, I've told you about reading those books. You're too young. No wonder you've had so many nightmares this week."

Two nights later

The little girl takes one almighty gasp of air and wakes up. She breathes in and out, in and out, trying to get air back into her lungs.

"John's in trouble," she says out aloud even though no one's there.

She looks into the hallway. It's dark. Why is it dark? Her mom always leaves the light on for her. She gets out of bed and stands there, trembling. She's cold and frightened. She grabs Paddington Bear and steps into the dark hallway, holding him tucked under her arm. She inches her way down the hallway, back against the wall. Another few steps and she'll be at the light switch. There. She switches it on and takes a deep breath in. It's better now. It's not dark. She walks past John's room, frightened to go in. But she must. She holds Paddington tighter and switches on the light in her brother's room. The window's open and John is gone.

Then images hit her hard and fast. She looks down at John—she's suddenly taller than he is. Her hand reaches out, but it's a big hand. A man's hand. She's someone else. John's crying and she feels the pleasure the man feels at John's pain. Her big hands encircle John's neck and push, harder and harder. John splutters, gasping for air. She feels the killer's feelings. She feels happiness and a surge of adrenaline as John goes limp.

She collapses on the floor.

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First published in Great Britain 2007.
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN: 978 0 7783 0188 2

58-0108

Printed and bound in Spain
by Litografia Rosés S.A., Barcelona