

girl
at the
grave

Teri Bailey Black



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GIRL AT THE GRAVE

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1

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“The whole head is sick,” the Reverend Mr. Oliver read with gravity. “And the whole heart faint.”

A tuft of his soft gray hair stuck up at the back of his head, wobbling like a feather, and I wished I could smooth it for him. The rector was an awkward, dreamy-eyed man, a widower with no children. But I liked his gentle, rolling voice, which filled the dining hall with beautiful phrases I barely understood, let alone believed.

But I wanted to believe. I wanted to believe there was some hope for the hopeless. Some worth behind the worthless. Some forgiveness for the unforgivable.

My classmates liked Friday devotionals for another reason. Boys and girls were kept separate at Drake Academy, taught in different buildings, even eating at different hours, but apparently the board of trustees approved of coeducational worship, for we were brought together for the rector’s weekly visits. The dining tables were pushed back and the chairs lined up in tidy rows with an aisle down the center. Not unlike church, the trustees must have imagined. They didn’t see the way Lucy Meriwether sat on the far side of her chair so her hips touched

Rowan Blackshaw's. Or the way she whispered in his ear, her lips nearly touching his skin. He tilted his head toward hers, mesmerized.

But I saw everything from my seat in the back corner.

Today, I felt like a wet cat brought indoors—and smelled like one with my damp wool dress. The boots I'd polished last week were now caked in mud; my hemline wet and heavy; my long curls soaked, sending drips down my neck. I squeezed my chest, holding in the shivers.

After three and a half years of trying to fit in at Drake Academy, all it took was a little rain to remind me that I never would.

No one else looked wet. Most of the eighty or so students boarded on campus—the boys in the new dormitory building and the girls in the founder's old home. A few local students walked like me, and Rowan Blackshaw rode his horse when the weather was fine. But on mornings like this, the other locals arrived in carriages. I was the only one who walked every day, regardless of weather.

Beside me, rain splattered and dripped on the window. It should be snowing in December, not raining.

"From the sole of the foot, even unto the head," Mr. Oliver read from his Bible, hardly aware of us. "There is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores."

"*Putrefying sores,*" Jack Utley whispered to his friend, and their shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. They would repeat the phrase for days.

"Man in his natural state," the rector droned on, "unassisted by the grace of God."

Rowan Blackshaw looked over his shoulder and found me in my back corner. I met his stare with feigned indifference, but my chest tightened as it always did. He looked annoyingly dry and well-tailored, wearing a dark blue jacket, soft neckcloth, and well-polished boots. Only his dark hair looked slightly damp and tousled, the only untamed thing about him. Except his eyes, which smoldered with . . .

What?

Contempt. Rowan Blackshaw had reason to hate me. But sometimes it almost looked like something else.

I forced my attention back to the rector, determined to listen.

But it was impossible to be in the same space as Rowan Blackshaw and not feel his presence. And he seemed to feel the same way, his eyes finding me whenever our paths crossed. More than once, I'd imagined his burning stare on the back of my neck, only to turn and see that I hadn't imagined it.

Contempt . . . or something else?

The sermon ended, and the girls' sewing teacher, Miss Dibble, stepped onto the dais to lead us in a closing hymn. Our voices rose in solemn, faltering unison, overshadowed by Simon Greene's exceptional piano playing, then the Reverend Mr. Oliver offered the benediction.

"Amen," we finally murmured, lifting our heads.

But we weren't finished. The headmaster, Mr. Foley, always gave closing remarks. He stepped up to the low dais, slim and severe in his black suit, and the room fell silent, students straightening in their chairs.

"Only one week remains before your Christmas holiday," he intoned, studying the assembly with his usual fierce attention—all except my back corner, which he carefully avoided. "Today, I have the pleasure of announcing the honor students for the term, who will be invited to the Honor Tea next Friday, along with their parents. Come forward when your name is announced."

Whispers rose like bees, even though the same students were honored every term. But the freshmen had yet to learn the names of their favored few, and Mr. Foley began with them—three boys and three girls, aged thirteen or fourteen, who looked startled and wandered forward with uncertainty. Then the sophomores were announced, who strode forward with more confidence, showing the freshmen how to line up beside Mr. Foley. Then the juniors.

And finally, my senior class sat at attention.

“Rowan Blackshaw!” Mr. Foley announced with pleasure, which didn’t surprise anyone—least of all Rowan, whose grandmother was on the board of trustees and surely knew in advance. He rose and walked to the front, accompanied by a flutter of whispered congratulations, for he was well liked—worshiped even, which I’d never understood. He wasn’t part of them. Not really. He was richer than anyone else, for one thing—an extraordinary feat, since most of the students at Drake came from affluent families. And he always seemed slightly overdressed, as if a servant had buttoned his jacket that morning and brushed lint off his shoulders.

But it was more than that.

Rowan pretended to care about their teasing banter—laughed at their jokes, slapped shoulders, returned the girls’ doe-eyed flirtations—but some quiet part of him remained aloof. He barely paid attention to his friends’ raucous stories, his focus drifting to some far-off point. And he was constantly scribbling in the leather notebook he carried everywhere, slamming it shut whenever someone walked near.

“Jacob Macauley,” Mr. Foley continued, which was also expected. But then, “Simon Greene,” which generated a murmur of surprise, since Simon had never been honored before. He looked startled as he rose from the piano.

Mr. Foley lifted his chin above his starched collar. “And now, I am pleased to announce the top girls in the senior class.” But he didn’t look pleased, and everyone knew that he didn’t approve of girls attending Drake. The founder’s widow, Martha Drake, had been an abolitionist and women’s rights advocate, and she’d refused to donate another penny after her husband’s death until girls were admitted, even turning her own home into their dormitory. Two years ago, she’d died, but her fellow activist, Josephine Blackshaw, now sat on the board of trustees, ensuring girls remained.

“Lucille Meriwether,” Mr. Foley announced with solemnity.

Lucy did her best to appear surprised as she rose and walked forward, wearing her favorite color, lavender, while her best friend, Philly Henny, looked ready to burst with pride.

“Jane Stiles.” Jane’s little yelp of relief carried across the room. Her father was the governor of Connecticut, which placed her firmly at the top of Drake Academy’s social structure, but she never relaxed. Never stopped reaching for more.

“And lastly—” Mr. Foley paused to clear his throat, but everyone knew it would be Meg Miller, the tallest girl in our class. It was always Tall Meg. “Valentine Deluca.”

The air seemed to leave the room. Whispers ceased, Lucy froze half-way up the two steps to the dais, and Rowan’s gaze quickly shifted to my back corner. Other than the heavy beating of my own heart and the pattering of the rain on the window, the room fell silent.

“Come forward, Miss Deluca,” Mr. Foley said with an edge.

Slowly, everyone turned to look at me. I felt rigid beneath their stares, hardly able to breathe, but I somehow managed to rise and walk—aware of my muddy boots and wet hair and the murky stench of wet wool wafting off me. I stumbled up the two steps to the dais and walked toward Jane Stiles, who shifted closer to Lucy.

“Congratulations, honor students of Drake Academy. Letters will be mailed to your parents, informing them of your achievement and inviting them to the Honor Tea.” Mr. Foley’s gaze flickered to me, and I knew my father wouldn’t be receiving an invitation. Which didn’t matter; he wouldn’t have attended. “You are dismissed. Proceed to your first class.”

Everyone’s attention immediately shifted elsewhere, bodies rising, chairs scraping. Next to me, the other honor students turned to congratulate one another, their relief already sliding into smug confidence. I stood uncertainly behind Jane for a moment, feeling out of place, then turned and slipped away, down the two steps to the dining hall floor.

“Valentine,” a feathery voice called, and I turned to see my sewing teacher, Miss Dibble, approaching—a blond, easily flustered woman of about thirty-five years. She was something of a joke among the students; she had a tendency to whisper to herself as she sewed and had an obvious infatuation with the history teacher, Mr. Albright, who avoided her. “How surprising!” she declared in her whispery voice. “How very unexpected and surprising!”

“Is it?” I asked, stiffening. I knew I deserved the award; sitting next to the same girls in class, year after year, some things became obvious.

“Oh, not that you aren’t an excellent student, of course, only that Mr. Foley—” Miss Dibble glanced over her shoulder to make sure the headmaster was a safe distance away. “Well, he’s never acknowledged it before, has he? Do you think someone forced his hand—someone of *particular influence*?” Her eyebrows lifted above blue eyes.

Miss Dibble could never resist an intrigue, and my being honored was the most intriguing thing to happen in weeks, but she was fooling herself if she thought someone of influence had spoken up on my behalf. “I can’t think who.”

“But, your benefactor, surely,” she said with hushed eagerness. “The person who has paid your tuition all these years. Don’t you see? They must have learned that your achievements were being overlooked and insisted you be recognized.”

She’d managed to pique my interest. “My benefactor? Do you know who he is?” All these years, I’d wondered.

Miss Dibble’s expression faltered. “Well, no, but surely you do?”

She’d come to learn my benefactor’s identity, not reveal it. “Foley refuses to tell me. It’s part of the arrangement.”

Her eyes widened. “But, you must have some idea?”

“Who cares enough about Valentine Deluca to pay for her education? I cannot guess.” I glanced at the arched opening in the back corner of the dining hall. My friend Sam was probably waiting.

“Well, in any event, I hope you have something appropriate.”

I forced my attention back to Miss Dibble. “Appropriate?”

“To wear! You can’t wear any old thing. It’ll be evening attire.” Her gaze flickered down my plain wool dress.

The Honor Tea. A flutter of nerves ran through me. Tea and cake with the headmaster and trustees—not to mention Jane’s father, Governor Stiles. I used to dream about going but never believed it would happen.

Miss Dibble patted my arm. “I’m sure we can find something. I’ve saved all my dresses from when I was your age. I’ll go through them tonight.”

Her generosity touched me. She’d been best friends with my mother growing up—something she’d only told me in confidence, hoping others had forgotten. “Thank you, Miss Dibble. That’s very kind.”

“Now, I must hurry to class. I have the freshmen first hour, and they’re completely hopeless.” She flashed a vague smile as she hurried away.

I glanced at the dais. The other top students still lingered, enjoying their moment, which meant I had a few minutes for Sam. I made my way to the back corner and entered the narrow room between the dining hall and the kitchen, where food was served.

My best friend, Sam Frye, leaned against a long buffet table, his arms crossed, his apron soiled by something dark and greasy. Breakfast had been cleared, and I could hear the clatter of lunch being prepared through the far door. He grinned when he saw me. “What were you doing up on the stand? You looked like you might faint.”

“I almost did,” I admitted. “I’m a top student.”

“You won a prize?”

I flashed a wry smile. “Not exactly, but Foley’s finally admitted I attend this school.” In the distance, a pot clattered to the floor, followed by a woman’s harsh scolding. “You’d better get back before you’re fired.” Sam worked in the kitchen, hauling heavy bags of flour and

crates of potatoes and enormous, steaming pots of stew. He wasn't allowed to interact with the students.

But he only shrugged a broad shoulder. "Right now, I'm unloading fish in the yard, can't you tell?"

"Curious; you don't smell like fish." He smelled like freshly turned soil and split-rail fences and a log cabin with smoke curling from its chimney, like always. His hair was the color of summer straw, his face tanned and handsome, his lips quick to smile. His eyes were an unearthly shade of green. Sam was seventeen, but I still saw a freckled ten-year-old when I looked at him—the ten-year-old who'd taught me how to fish and chop wood and kill a chicken. The friend who'd helped me survive after my mother died.

"I need a fancy dress for the Honor Tea," I told him. "Miss Dibble says she'll help me."

"Honor Tea? Is that as exciting as it sounds?"

We heard voices approaching from the dining hall, and I pulled Sam into the alcove where dishes were kept, stacked on shelves. I yanked the curtain across the opening just in time.

"There'd better be bacon," a boy's voice said. Jack Utley. His parents owned the general store in Feavers Crossing.

I peeked around the edge of the curtain and saw two boys and two girls—the other seniors who lived locally, including Rowan Blackshaw. The four of them made their way to the end of the long room, where extra food was left out for growing boys who couldn't wait until the next meal.

"No bacon," Jack complained. He was shorter than the others, and his jacket was too tight, tugging at his waistline. "There was lots at breakfast. Thieving kitchen staff is taking it home."

Sam released an indignant breath near my ear.

Their backs were turned, so I dared to keep watching. Rowan uncovered a platter and slid it toward Jack. "Here it is."

"Did you see Valentine's shoes?" Philly Henny asked. She lived

across the road from me. We used to play together, a lifetime ago. “She left mud on the dais.”

“It should have been Tall Meg up there,” Lucy stated. Her blond hair was pinned up today, intertwined with a lavender ribbon in an intricate manner, letting everyone know her family kept a lady’s maid. “Valentine cheats, everyone knows that.”

“Does she?” Jack sounded envious. He’d been a lazy student back in grammar school and only attended Drake because his rich uncle paid for it. He slid more bacon into his mouth and spoke around it. “Why doesn’t Foley expel her?”

“Because Foley’s a toad,” Lucy said. “She’s cast some sort of spell over him—over all the teachers.”

“Maybe she’s a witch,” Jack said.

Which was all Lucy needed. “Of course she’s a witch. Haven’t you seen her in the graveyard? She says a magic spell and the graves open up. She sleeps in a coffin.”

Jack struggled to not laugh, his mouth full.

Sam shifted behind me, and I pressed my back against his chest, holding him in place. There was a gap at the edge of the curtain, but if they didn’t look this way, they wouldn’t notice us.

“That’s where she gets her dresses,” Lucy went on. I could hear the smile in her voice. “She takes them off the dead. Then she eats their rotting flesh. She doesn’t eat normal food, just decaying bodies. And rats and toads.”

“Rats and toads,” Jack chortled. “You hear that, Rowan? Valentine digs up graves.”

“Shut up, Jack.” But Rowan said it lightly. It took more than Jack Utley to rattle him.

“But didn’t you hear? What if she digs up your—”

“I said shut up.”

Jack’s laughter faded.

“Come on, we’re late,” Lucy said. “There’d better be some umbrellas

at the door.” The girls’ classes were held across the grounds in the old, original schoolhouse. Lucy left the way they’d entered, and the others followed.

All except Rowan, who paused in the doorway, turning to look back. His gaze settled on the curtained alcove, letting me know he’d known I was there all along, then he disappeared through the opening.

Contempt?

It had almost looked like guilt.

Sam yanked the curtain open and started after them, then stopped and came back, frustrated. Because it wasn’t worth losing his job. And it wasn’t anything that hadn’t happened before. Or wouldn’t happen again.

“It doesn’t matter,” I told him.

“How can you stand it?”

“It’s just Lucy. No one takes her seriously. She’ll say anything for attention. Now, go get that fish before you’re fired. I’ve got Latin.” I stepped away.

But Sam reached out and took my hand, holding me back. He waited for me to look up and meet his green eyes. “Four more months, Valentine, then you’ll graduate and be free of this place.”

I forced a weak smile.

What Sam didn’t understand was that Drake Academy was the only place where I did feel free, where I managed to escape the truth for a few glorious hours, lost in the Napoleonic Wars and the proper stitch to use when attaching lace and the conjugation of French verbs. I squeezed his hand and released it. “Bye, Sam.”

The dining hall was nearly deserted, only a few stragglers remaining. I hurried across it, then made my way across the main foyer to the row of wall pegs where my cloak hung alone. I pulled it on and opened the front door.

Outside, heavy sheets of cold rain fell. I glanced at the umbrella stands and found them empty, so I lifted my skirt and ran.