



CHRISTINE H BAILEY

A N O V E L

BURNING
LITTLE
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A Novel

by

Christine H. Bailey



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Content Warning: This book contains descriptions of sexual assault and trauma that may be disturbing to some readers.

Prologue



THERE'S BEEN A MYSTERY for months surrounding who killed Ellie Stone. All anyone seems to know is that she was found dead at the edge of the Usman River with a blue flower placed over each of her eyes. No arrests have been made and nothing has been released about cause of death, only that it's been classified as a homicide. It's been consuming our small town ever since—the *who did it* and *is he coming for me next?* She was only sixteen... *as lovely as they come.*

People are saying it was someone she met online or the work of a serial killer. A few years back, two girls went missing from a town not too far from us. One of the girls was found buried in a small field of blue flowers. Some people think the wrong person is in prison and that the real killer is still out there. But there are other theories too, one of which includes Ellie's own circle of friends. I've heard the whispers, the rumors, people saying it was one of us. It's bizarre how small-town gossip spreads like wildfire, curling at the edges of our lives like crisping newspaper as the wicking flame catches.

But I know the truth. I know who did it because I was there that night. She didn't deserve to die. Not like that. I've been holding my breath ever since, knowing that eventually the person who did it will get caught. But I'm not telling which one of us killed her; whether it was boy-genius Nick Moore, his brother Hayes, Tori her best friend, or Piper the outcast. We're all guilty of keeping secrets, but one of us is hiding the biggest one of all.

One of us knows it all.

Part One: Tori

Chapter 1



THE HINT OF JAPANESE cherry blossoms from outside the classroom window smelled sweet in the chilled air, fresh after rain. To me, the flurry of pale pink blooms in late March always marked the real beginning of spring in our little Mississippi town. Waterford had always been known for its annual Cherry Blossom Festival, but lately, we'd been in the spotlight for something else—something none of us would have ever imagined. I glanced at the empty desk next to mine and slumped lower in my seat as our twenty-something Poli-Sci teacher, Miss Taylor, tried her best to get us back on track. She had just opened the window, trying to keep us awake during last period on a Friday afternoon.

“Let’s talk about the global economic impact from the COVID-19 pandemic,” she said.

Someone behind me groaned.

I slid an earbud under my hair. It wasn’t that I didn’t care about the global impact of the pandemic. I really did. It was more about her too-bright pink lipstick and the high pitch of her voice. No one should ever be that chipper discussing a virus.

A twinge of guilt swept over me, for a split second, before I hit play on my phone. Not even the deep, baritone voiceover on my audiobook could drown out my teacher’s nasally voice, but *anything* helped. Besides, I was doing my AP English homework, listening to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. So, the way I saw it, I was using my time wisely, knocking out both English *and* Poli-Sci by studying the impact of Russian literature on the rest of the world.

Miss Taylor droned on for the next twenty minutes, losing almost everyone in class except for freshman phenom

Nick Moore, who sat a couple rows over from me. The kid was brilliant. That's why he was the only freshman in a class with mostly juniors. But he was weird too, always staring at people—me, for one—like he was psychoanalyzing us or something. He probably was. His mother was a therapist after all. *My* therapist. I turned back to my notebook, shading Tolstoy's bushy eyebrows then adding a few more lines to his billowing beard, which kind of looked like swirls of cherry blossoms. My rendering of the literary genius wasn't half bad. Ellie, my best friend, would have loved it. She would have laughed, adding her own touches to the drawing. I leaned back, sighing at her empty desk. The girl in front of me turned around, bugging her eyes out at me. "What?" I asked, before peeking over my shoulder to see who else had heard me. Yep, Nick had. He was still staring.

When the bell finally rang, everyone bolted out of their seats, rushing for the door as Miss Taylor rattled off an optional homework assignment for the weekend. I'd probably do it, especially after my last test grade.

"It's contradictory, don't you think?" Nick asked, stopping at my desk. He slipped his backpack over his shoulders, securing the strap across his narrow chest until it wrinkled his shirt.

"What?" I hit the pause button on my phone and glanced at Miss Taylor, who was cleaning the whiteboard.

"It's contradictory seeing history as both predestined and yet determined by individual free will, you know, small choices, freely made?" He scratched the freckles dotting the bridge of his nose and squinted his hazel eyes, slightly magnified behind thick glasses.

I shook my head, slightly irritated. *What was this guy talking about?*

He pointed to the notebook on my desk, nodding at my drawing and chicken-scratch writing on themes in *War and Peace*. "Tolstoy?"

"Oh, right." I shoved the notebook in my backpack and zipped it, then started to head for the door.

"If you ever want to talk about it—"

"I'll let you know." I really wasn't trying to be rude or anything, but I wasn't in the mood to chat about literary themes with Boy Genius on a Friday afternoon. I'd *almost* made it out the door when Miss Taylor called me back. "Yes, ma'am?" I turned in the doorway.

"Have a second?" she asked.

Really? Right now? I gritted my teeth and forced a quick smile. "Sure."

Nick swept by me in the doorway. "Bye."

"Yeah, see ya," I said, moving toward Miss Taylor's desk. She was latching the window as a sudden, cherry-blossom breeze swept into the room. I cleared my throat to get her attention.

"Oh," she said, twirling around to face me. She paused for a second then said, "Your hair looks nice. Did you get highlights?"

She asked me to stay after class to talk about my hair? Weird. It was the same plain brown as always. Everything about it was the same from the color to the way I wore it: parted in the middle and long, straight, and loose. "Um, nope."

She fidgeted with the top button on her pale pink oxford shirt. "Oh, looks like you got highlights. Anyway, have a seat."

"I kind of need to get home?"

"Right, right. I'll be quick then. You seemed distracted in class. Everything okay?"

I was growing pretty tired of everyone asking me that. My answer was the same every time. No, everything was *not* okay. My best friend was still dead. Still gone from my life forever. "Yep, I'm good."

"It's just that your last exam, well, it wasn't up to your usual..."

"Yeah, sorry about that." I nodded, giving her the reassurance that she was wanting.

"I know things have been hard lately, but..."

Hard? That was the understatement of the year. "I'll do better," I said, being short. I didn't want to go there with her. Not now. She kept staring at me though, like she wanted to say something more or maybe she wanted *me* to say something more. But what else was there to say?

"I just wanted to check in with you. That's all, Tori."

"Kay."

"Well, alright then. Have a good weekend."

"You too."

She was only trying to be nice and supportive, but sometimes all the asking about how I was feeling from what felt like literally everyone, well, it was too much for me. After I left her room, I took the less-traveled back hallway toward the faculty parking lot. No one ever used that exit except for a few teachers

that I didn't know very well—and they *never* talked to me. I kept my head down anyway, just in case, and plugged in my other earbud.

Outside, the sun was starting to break through the patchy rain clouds. As the deep, baritone voice recited Tolstoy in my ears, I thought about what Miss Taylor had said. Okay, so maybe my grades had been horrible lately, but that was to be expected, right? I'd do better, just like I'd told her I would. I had to. There was no way I was repeating junior year. So far, it had been the worst of my life. And besides that, my parents would lose it if I failed all my classes, especially my mom. I crossed through the parking lot, making a plan that would catch me up in all of my classes, not just Poli-Sci. But then, it got me thinking, too, about what Nick had said after class. What had he meant anyway by our small choices determining our histories? I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it.

Ten minutes later, I still hadn't figured it out as I neared his house on Church Street, not that I had any intention of ringing his bell to ask him what he'd meant. It was just that his house was on the way to mine. That was all.

But I did slow down for a second.

I wish I hadn't.

The turn-of-the-century estate in the middle of town had always intrigued me. It was straight out of an eerie movie with its thick evergreens guarding most of the house from street view, but not all of it. You could still see peaks of the gabled roof and thick ivy that crept up the front stonework. Off to the side was a separate entrance where an old carriage house used to be. They'd converted it years ago into a garage before turning it into Dr. Moore's office. At least, that's what she'd told me once in a session.

I needed to go back. I'd cancelled the last four sessions with her, promising my mom I'd go "next time," but the thought of sitting in that room, talking about my feelings to Dr. Moore made my stomach twist. It didn't help, talking about it. Nothing helped. I rubbed the chill bumps sprouting on my arms. "Next time," I mumbled as I turned to cross the street... not looking.

How many times had my mom told me to "look both ways before you cross"? But I didn't look. Not even a quick over-the-shoulder glance.

It all happened so fast—the screeching tires and the front

grill of the silver SUV only a few inches from me. As it squealed to a stop, I lurched backwards and stumbled on the curb, losing my balance. I must have rolled, trying to break my fall, but I wasn't sure exactly what had happened. The next thing I knew, I was splayed out on the gritty asphalt with Tolstoy still going in my ears. "Okay, you're done," I said, slowly removing an AirPods. The other one—the left one—was gone. I tried lifting my head to search for it, but a bolt of pain shot right through my body from my right temple down to both knees. I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth. Why hadn't I looked before crossing the road? Why? Why? *Why?*

I didn't move. I stayed as still as possible as footsteps echoed near me on the pavement, getting closer and closer.

"Are you okay?" someone called out.

That voice—it was so familiar. I wanted to see who it was, see who had almost hit me, but even opening my eyes in the bright sun hurt.

"I'm so sorry. I— I didn't see you. You just..."

"My AirPods," I whispered.

"Tori? Are you okay?" he asked again, this time quieter, closer, and more panicked.

He knew my name. I opened one eye, but I couldn't see anything except for a shadowed face against the sun. It was blinding and bearing down on me full force. "You almost hit me," I said as I wiped what I thought was sweat from my right temple.

"Oh, man, you're bleeding."

"What?" I asked, squinting.

"You're bleeding," he repeated.

He was right. My fingertips were red. I was about to give him a piece of my mind that maybe he should slow down or watch where he was going when he shifted slightly, blocking the sun in my eyes. That's when I saw who it was. My heart raced, and the throb in my head worsened with every thudding beat. *Oh, great. Anyone but him.*

"I'm sorry," Hayes Moore said. He was Nick's older brother. My therapist's other son. "I didn't see you. I swear. You just ran out in front of me."

Heat rushed to my face, and my pulse ramped up as he squatted in front of me. All those kindergarten playground moments of me chasing him, giving him fruit snacks, kids singing

Tori and Hayes, sitting in a tree... it all flooded back as a couple of cars honked in the street, swerving past us.

How mortifying. I'd just been mowed down—nearly killed—by our junior class president, who was also my ten-year unrequited crush.

"Can you sit up?" he asked, reaching for my hand.

My throat went dry as he held my stare with those storm-colored eyes of his, the ones with flecks of gold and deep blue. "I don't know. I can try." I bit my bottom lip and winced as he helped me sit up. My head was suddenly spinning as I breathed in hints of exhaust and his cologne, which was faint but nice, like springtime.

He took off his gray hoodie and balled up one of the sleeves, pressing it to my temple. "Want me to call the police? Take you to the ER?"

"No," I said, glancing from the Nike swoosh on his t-shirt to the small crowd that had gathered behind us on the sidewalk. One of the gawkers was a kid from school, holding up his phone and recording it all. *Great.* That was all I needed.

"Are you sure?"

"What?"

"Are you sure I shouldn't call someone?"

"I'm sure."

He lifted the sweatshirt from my gash and leaned in to examine it. "It's not deep. Don't think you'll need stitches."

I raised my hand to it, accidentally brushing his.

He took a quick breath then handed me the hoodie. "Keep pressure on it." He stepped back, rubbing his bare arms.

"I lost an earbud," I said.

He opened his mouth like he was about to say something when someone from across the street screamed, "Oh my gosh!"

It was Rachel, his girlfriend, getting out of her Honda and racing toward us.

"What happened?" she asked, out of breath. She wrapped her thin arms around his waist then stepped back to examine him. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," I mumbled under my breath. *Thanks for asking.*

Hayes cut his eyes at me.

What? I wanted to say. It wasn't like he was the one bleeding from his head. I grabbed my bookbag, wedged in the storm drain, and started heading in the opposite direction of them.

My knee stung as sweat and dirt trickled into a small gash, visible through a new hole in my jeans. Why did I have to stop? If only I'd kept walking. *What a nightmare*, I thought as I glanced over my shoulder at him one more time.

"Wait," he called out. He was reaching down in the road for something. He held it up—something small between his thumb and forefinger.

No way. It was my AirPods. I met him halfway, amazed that he'd found it.

As he handed it to me, he said, "I really am sorry."

"It's okay." It wasn't like he'd done it on purpose or anything.

"Let me know if you need anything, 'kay?"

Rachel huffed loudly behind him.

"Thanks. I will," I said, even though I never would.

Besides, it was just a little bump and a few scratches. Still, my head throbbed with every step against the asphalt. But it was what I did... smile through the pain.

As soon as I turned the corner, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. My heart sank. Surely that gawker from school hadn't already posted the video online. All I needed was the whole world to see me lying in the street cut up and bloodied. I pulled out my phone to check, but it was just Drew, my boyfriend, asking where I was. I didn't have the head space to explain what had just happened. I'd tell him later. Maybe.

Or maybe not.

It had been really hard talking to him lately—about anything—even though we'd been together for over a whole year. When we first started going out, I thought there was no way he could be interested in me. It had to be Ellie. Every guy at school had it bad for her. I kept waiting for him to say it—the line I'd heard a million times: *Do you think you could talk to her for me?* But Drew never said those words. Sometimes, I still wondered, *why me?*

Now, glancing down at his text, at the blinking cursor waiting for me to respond, I had no idea what to say. It wasn't his fault that we'd fallen out of sync. Every time we hung out, he wanted to talk about Ellie or school or baseball or whatever, but it was like I couldn't hold a conversation about anything anymore. Somewhere along the line, I'd forgotten how to be... me.

I slipped my phone back in my pocket and kept moving.

The sun shifted behind a thick blanket of rain clouds, still lingering, making the sky gray and sad. More rain was coming, but I kept going anyway, limping right past my house. Mom's car wasn't in the driveway yet. She usually got home from work around 4:30, which gave me just enough time to head over to Ellie's house for a quick visit. It was what I'd done every Friday since *that day*—go around the block to sit under Ellie's bedroom window. I'd stay a while and then get back home just before Mom did, before she could ask where I'd been.

The house hadn't changed. It was the same two-story white-bricked colonial with its massive Magnolia tree in the front yard. I took my place under her window, slightly shaded by a row of evergreens, and finally exhaled. "So, guess what, El? Listen to what happened to me today."

A car revved its engine on another street.

"You wouldn't believe who hit me with his car... Hayes. Hayes Moore."

I could see her apple-green eyes widen and her lips part in surprise. "No way... get out," she'd say.

"No, seriously, he did. Well, he *almost* hit me."

"Let me guess," I imagined her saying, "you were all like, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault, blah, blah, blah."

"No way. I told him to watch where he was going, and that he almost killed me."

"Uh huh. Sure."

"I did! He was all freaked out about it and kept apologizing... and then *she* showed up."

"Ugh, Rachel."

"Yeah, Rachel," I whispered, leaning the back of my head against the brick wall of my best friend's house. I sat there for a while longer, quiet with my head aching. I didn't stay too long though. I never did, afraid I'd somehow wake up Peaches—her tiny terrier—and alert everyone to a "stranger" in the yard. Afraid that Ellie's mom would see the small lump of a girl in ripped black jeans and a hoodie over her head and get her hopes up that it *hadn't* happened. That it had been all a hellish nightmare and that her baby girl was still alive. Then she'd realize it was only me. Pathetic Tori. The best friend who'd left Ellie alone that night at the bonfire. I didn't want to be around for that reckoning.

And so I left.

On my way home, I cut through the woods between our houses, thinking, again, about how I'd left Ellie that night. Small choices. Is that what Nick had meant earlier? Did he know something? The sun was out again, peeking through another break in the clouds and offering new little streams of light. But it didn't make any difference to me. I hadn't felt the tiniest glimmer of hope in weeks. Not since they'd found my best friend by the river, fully clothed, arms crossed over her chest, and with a single blue flower over each of her eyes. I wanted her back. Nothing in my life had been right since.

I stopped on my back porch and glimpsed her house through the woods. "I'm so sorry, El. I'm sorry this happened to you."

My phone buzzed in my back pocket.

What I wouldn't give for it to be her, saying *come over*. But it was Drew again, asking if I was okay. *Saw the video online*, he wrote.

Great. Just great.

Why didn't you tell me Hayes hit you with his car?

He didn't exactly hit me, I texted back. *But I'm fine. Just a few scratches.*

I'd been numb for weeks. What were a few scratches in the bigger scheme of things? Even if Hayes *had* hit me, not even the impact of a head-on collision with an SUV would make a difference.

Chapter 2



I KEPT MY BEDROOM window open all night, hoping the distant cries of spring peepers would lull me to sleep. It hadn't come easy lately, not since they found Ellie. Some nights were worse than others—the nightmares, the guilt, the dark thoughts. Usually, I'd fight it, toss and turn into a twisted, exhausted knot and eventually fall asleep. But that wasn't happening tonight.

I sank deep under my covers, picturing Ellie beside me with her dark hair spilling over onto my pillowcase. All those sleepovers when we stayed up until dawn laughing, talking, confessing our deepest secrets—all of it was gone now. I rolled onto my side and swept my fingers across the pillow beside me. "That video of me lying in the street," I whispered, "is posted online. It's so mortifying." I could see her wrinkling her nose. It's what she did when she didn't know what to say.

That wrinkle. I missed it. I missed everything about her, like how she always apologized first, even if it wasn't her fault. I missed the way she'd pull me to my feet and make me dance or sing along to her new favorite song, whatever it was that week. She was so vivacious. So full of life. She *was*, past tense. And now, her future was gone. No prom, no graduation, and no going to one of the colleges we'd applied to together. How was I supposed to deal with that? I closed my eyes and rolled over.

By five a.m., I finally gave up the good fight for sleep, shoving my toes into pink fuzzy slippers and making my way downstairs in the soft blue-gray light of predawn. Dad was moving around in the guest room, probably making the bed and trying to hide that he'd slept there again. I didn't have the heart to tell him I knew.

As my lemongrass tea steeped on the veined marble

countertop, I wished for it all back, for those beautifully uncomplicated days full of little nothings—of lemonade stands and lazy summer afternoons. If only. Then everything would be okay again... I'd have Ellie back and my parents would be happy again.

But as I swiped through my phone, trying my best to avoid the video of me and all of the comments under it, I landed on that same post I'd seen a million times—the one about Ellie's death—and I knew it would *never* be okay again. My stomach wrenched at the sight of her school photo, the one with that tiny, smart-ass smirk. The headline still cut like it had the first time I'd seen it weeks ago: **Waterford Teen Ellie Stone, Dead at 16.**

Almost two whole months had passed with no new information. All we knew, all that anyone knew, was that she was found dead by the Usman River after Sam Cox's birthday party at White Pines Farm. And the only reason we knew any of what we did, like the blue flowers over her eyes, was because a first responder had taken a photo of the crime scene and had leaked it. Other than that, we knew nothing.

Oh, there'd been theories, lots of them, from it being the work of a serial killer to a ritual cult killing. Some people even believed that the river was cursed and connected to other deaths—its “evil currents” flowing into Pine Lake, where other mysterious deaths had occurred. Everyone had a theory. But what good were theories without an arrest? The police weren't doing squat, and it was really starting to get to me, festering like a cancer.

“Morning, kiddo,” Dad said, slipping into the kitchen.

“Hey,” I said, trying not to sound too resentful for him being a cop, even though he wasn't the one working Ellie's case. He was in Narcotics, not Homicide, but still, he could do more, right? I sipped at my warm lemongrass blend as Dad opened the cabinet over the microwave for the Folgers.

“Can't sleep?” he asked while scooping tall heaps of coffee into the pot.

He'd make it too strong, as usual, and then Mom would come in later, dump the rest of the thick, black sludge into the sink, and make a smoother pot. That's how things went down lately.

“Not really.” I cradled the hot cup of tea in my palms, star-

ing out the kitchen window into the deep, dark woods behind my house. Who could sleep, knowing that whoever did this to her was still out there?

In the winter months, Ellie's bedroom was visible from my house, or at least a light coming from it was through the evergreens. But now, in the thickening throng of trees, it was hard to see anything. At least the sun was starting to come up, meaning the scary monsters in the woods would soon be retreating.

"You work today?" Dad asked. He was sitting at the table now, waiting for the coffee to brew. His shoulders sagged under his wrinkled t-shirt, gray and drab. Mom always preferred him in blues and vibrant greens to "accent his eyes," she'd say.

"Yeah, later." I sat beside him as he nudged a day-old box of donut holes toward me. The perfect cliché, a cop and his donuts. I popped one into my mouth, calculating the calories as the sugars sat on my tongue.

"What time?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Noon, maybe?" Or was it four? I reached for my phone, checking the schedule my co-worker Piper had sent me. She'd been nice like that, sending me texts here and there, asking how I was, and taking my shifts when I couldn't face the world. We'd been super close in ninth grade, Ellie, Piper, and me, but we'd drifted apart like friends sometimes do. Lately, we'd started talking and texting again, now that she worked at Blue's Café.

I'd tried quitting a few times, but Mom had always come back in that thick, Mississippi drawl of hers: "It's not right to leave them high and dry." But she didn't get it. It wasn't her best friend who had died, who had left her in the messy, tangled aftermath, and it wasn't her being asked the same horrible questions week after week after week.

"Any new leads?" *No.*

"Do you think her boyfriend did it?" *No.*

"Such a shame, don't you think?" *Yes.*

"She was a lovely girl, wasn't she?" *The best.*

"Your dad getting closer to finding the guy?" *He's not on the case. He's in Narcotics.*

More than one person had said that with every passing day, things would get easier. Liars. They were all a bunch of stupid liars. I really did want to quit, but it was all I had left of Ellie. Memories of us sneaking brownie bites, hot from the oven

and scalding our tongues. Of closing the place and dancing to cheesy '90s country on the old-school jukebox. Of stolen breaks behind the dumpster, crying over boys.

The pipes creaked, which meant Mom was awake and in the shower. It also meant that at any second, Dad would make a move to leave. I waited for it—three, two, one—

“I should head to the gym before it gets too crowded.” He grabbed another donut hole.

“Or maybe you should cut down on the sugar?”

“Funny.” He kissed the top of my head, then paused, examining the cut on the side of my face again. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, Dad. I already told you it was no big deal. The car didn’t even hit me.”

“Okay, okay.” He held up his hands then headed to the coffee pot to top off his to-go mug. “Just making sure.” He turned toward the back door, stopping to grab his keys on the counter and rifle through a pile of day-old mail. “This one’s for you,” he said, holding up a cream envelope.

It was probably another college letter from another school that Ellie and I wouldn’t be attending together. He handed it to me. “Love you,” he said, then closed the door behind him.

The label on the front was typed. It didn’t look out of the ordinary, but it also didn’t look like the other letters I’d gotten from the universities Ellie and I had picked out online. We’d had big plans to leave our small town and go somewhere new. Anywhere but here. But as I tore it open and pulled out the letter, it wasn’t from a college. It was a piece of paper torn from a spiral notebook. I glanced out the window at the dark woods then back to the letter. Taped on the frayed page was a typed message: *I know what happened to Ellie Stone.*