

THE BOY WHO STEALS HOUSES

CHAPTER ONE

If it hadn't been so dark and if his fingers hadn't been so stiff with dried blood, he could've picked the lock in thirty-eight seconds.

Sammy Lou takes pride in that record. It's one of the few things he *can* take pride in, considering his life consists of charming locks, pockets full of stolen coins, broken shoelaces, and an ache in his stomach that could be hunger or loneliness.

Probably hunger.

He should be used to being alone by now.

He just needs to crack this freaking lock before someone sees and calls the cops. The house has been empty for days – so says the mouldering newspaper on the driveway, the closed curtains, the lack of lights at night. He knows. He's watched.

And now he's been at this lock for over two minutes. His palms go slick with sweat and the dried blood dampens and slips between his knuckles. His lock picks, a gift from his brother and usually an extension of Sam's thin and nimble fingers, feel too thick. Too slow.

He can't get caught.

He's been breaking into houses for a year now.

He *can't* get caught.

One of his lock picks gets jammed and he whispers a curse. He wriggles it free, but his heart thunders and seconds tick by too fast, so he abandons the lock and melts back into the shadows. There's always another way.

He slips around the house, undone shoelaces slapping his ankles. The house is old bricks, the windows cloistered with drawn blinds. It's harder to see back here, with a tall

fence blocking the moonlight. But a woodpile sits under a small window and it whispers welcome.

Sam dumps his backpack on the grass and scales the woodpile, placing each foot and hand gingerly so he doesn't end up underneath an avalanche of split logs. He's sore enough as is, thanks. His hands trace the small bathroom window and for once he's pleased he skipped out on the growth spurts regular fifteen-year-old boys encounter. He's a year off for his age. Maybe two. Looking small and pathetic usually works to his advantage, plus it turns tight windows and poky corners into opportunities.

Half balancing, half hugging the wall, Sam fiddles with the lock while the woodpile gives an ominous groan and shifts beneath him.

Things this family is good at: locking their house.

Things they suck at: stacking wood into a sturdy pile.

If this doesn't work, he'll have to—

'You could always break it.'

Sam's heart leaps about fifteen metres in the air – and unfortunately his feet follow. For a second he scrabbles to grip the wall, bricks ripping fingertips, and then he loses balance and tumbles backwards. The lock picks go flying into the darkness.

At least there's not far to fall.

At least the woodpile doesn't tip over too.

At least, Sam thinks, still on his back and staring up at a silhouette smudged against the stars, it's only his brother.

For a second Sam just lies there while the dewy grass soaks his shirt and his heart migrates back down his throat.

'Dammit, Avery,' Sam says.

‘I didn’t bring a hammer.’ Avery pulls his phone out of his pocket, flips on the torch app and shines it straight in Sam’s eyes. ‘But we could use a rock or, like, your head since it’s hard and ugly enough.’ He gives the tiniest breath of a laugh, but follows quickly with, ‘That was a joke. I was joking. You can tell it’s a joke, right?’

Sam wasn’t prepared for this tonight. Interruptions and complications and—

Avery.

And Avery wouldn’t show up unless—

‘Is something wrong?’ Sam shields his eyes from the glare. ‘Are you hurt or in trouble or ...’ His pulse quickens. ‘You’re OK?’

‘What?’ Avery blinks, confused. ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’

Sam didn’t realise, until the *I’m fine* comes, how tight his chest is. How shaky his hands suddenly are. He has to close his eyes a minute and fumble for a thin grip on calm. It’s fine. Avery’s fine.

Sam scrambles up and snaps, ‘Turn that light off.’

He doesn’t mean to snap. It’s just that rush of panic for nothing.

‘You’re mad?’ Avery tucks the phone to his chest, as if that could stop Sam taking it off him if Sam really wanted to. Avery’s all elbows and sharp jawlines, with a scar at the corner of his mouth, and a pointy elfish face that says he skipped the effort of growing too.

‘I’m about to be mad.’ Sam’s teeth clench. ‘Turn it *off* or I’ll smack you into the middle of next week.’

Avery frowns but turns the light off.

Sam’s lost his night vision now. His ears strain, but he doesn’t catch any movement or whispers. Or sirens. He’s not caught.

‘I could get you a phone.’ Avery rocks on his heels. ‘That would fix everything.’

Of course it would, Avery. A phone would fix the fact that Sam is a house thief in clothes he stole from a second-hand store, who needed a haircut months ago, with skin tight against his ribs like a tally of all the meals he's missed.

His fingers curl into fists. Sticky with blood. It's all bluff anyway because he'd never hit Avery. In fact it's the opposite. Sam spends his life hitting the world and smoothing over the rusty corners so Avery won't fall and hurt himself.

'I wouldn't need you to fix stuff,' Sam says, the barest frustrated tremble in his voice, 'if you'd stop ruining everything.'

The result is instant.

Avery wilts, shoulders hunched to make himself a smaller target. Sam is stupid, *stupid*. He shouldn't have said that.

'I didn't mean it.' He shuffles his hands in the grass in vain hopes he'll find the lock picks. Maybe he'll find a hundred dollars and a five-course meal down here too. But Avery's already started flapping, hands moving anxiously against his thighs in one of his endless tics. His thin lips have folded into their signature downturned pout, all poor waif and damp eyes that remind you that you're a complete asshole for being angry with him.

'Why didn't you hear me coming?' Avery says. 'You're supposed to be a burglar.' He glances around, hand-flapping escalating to a fist beating his own leg. 'We need to break in before we get caught and—'

'OK, OK, calm down.' Sam rubs his temples. 'What do you mean *we*?'

Avery touches the tips of his fingers to Sam's chest. 'You. And me. We.'

Sam opens his mouth to argue, but why bother? Avery isn't supposed to be here, even if Sam did off-handedly tell him what house he was breaking into tonight. But if Avery decides he's coming in – he's coming in. Sam's never said no to him in his life. Plus he's not wrong about how loud they're being. Sam's truly lost it this evening. Two failed break-in

attempts and now he's arguing in a stranger's backyard with his brother who can ruin everything and then tear up and make Sam feel like the monster.

Not that it's an untrue feeling. Not when he has blood on his knuckles.

He suddenly feels very tired. It has nothing to do with his aching cheekbone or bruised chest or two locks that defeated him.

It's just this.

All of it.

Standing between puddles of moonlight to steal into a house that isn't and will never be his, just so he has a place to sleep tonight.

'Just shut up and follow me,' Sam says, grabbing his backpack. 'Quietly. And don't – don't *break* anything. I want to stay here for a few days. You know that's how I work.'

Avery starts humming, which could be agreement or mean he's not listening. Sam smothers his annoyance. Breathe. Just breathe.

Sam moves towards the back door, the last hope, and Avery follows, flapping his hands distractedly.

The back of the house presents a patio crammed with too much furniture and barely enough space to squeeze through to the door. Sam inspects the lock and unfastens the paperclips he uses as zippers for his hoodie. The job is hard without a sturdy hook to keep the pressure on the lock. His fingers shake.

'Are you screwing up?' Avery says in a conversational tone.

Sam stabs harder at the lock. 'How about you just tell me why you're here?' He is relieved Avery's here, of course – safe and right where Sam can watch him – but a dark, selfish corner of Sam's heart was looking forward to sleeping tonight without *worrying*.

Well, Sam always worries about Avery, whether he's in sight or not. But a night alone would be a quiet break.

Seriously, Sam? This is your brother. You don't need a break. You shouldn't want one.

'I just missed you,' Avery says.

'Sure,' Sam says, knowing Avery won't notice the sarcasm. 'You're definitely not here because you want something.'

Once they stole houses together, but it quickly fell apart because Avery needs sameness and moving around so much had him in endless fretful meltdowns that even Sam couldn't soothe. Now? Avery rotates between sleeping in the back of the mechanic's shop, hoping his boss doesn't catch him, and hanging around a group of twenty-year-olds who have him run bad jobs and tell him he's cute while he smiles like an excited puppy and doesn't freaking *get* that they're using him. They let him sleep on their broken sofa. And that sameness? Only having to rotate between two places that don't change? Avery will take that instead of staying with Sam, waiting for him to *maybe* find a new place to sleep every night. Now he tells Sam that he's *got friends* and he's *got a job*, and he *can take care of himself*.

And then, when he inevitably still falls apart, he reappears and Sam has to fix everything.

Always.

That's why Sam's bloody and bruised tonight, isn't it? Fixing things for Avery. But if Avery knows what Sam did tonight, why he just beat someone up, he'll freak out. So, simple: he doesn't get to know.

There's also this small vicious corner of Sam's heart that wonders if Avery chooses to stay away because of how often Sam hits things. How much it scares him. But Sam does this for Avery, so it's not fair for him to judge—

Just don't ... don't think about it.

Sam wriggles the paperclip and the lock gives a satisfying click. Finally.

Avery chews his lip. ‘Don’t you get lonely living like this?’

Sam’s always alone, even when Avery is only a whisper behind him. He doesn’t feel like explaining, because Avery won’t get it, so he just slides the door open and lets Avery go in first while his own pulse evens out with relief. Now to wash off the blood. Now to curl up in a soft chair. Now to be still.

Except Avery is here and Avery is never still.

He tumbles inside and flips on a light switch and the *supposedly empty house* floods with hues of orange and gold.

Sam flies across the room and slaps the switch off. ‘Are you trying to get me caught?’

‘But why—’

‘No, stop, just ... just stop.’ Muted anger crunches between Sam’s teeth. ‘Close the blinds. Actually, don’t. I’ll do it and you be quiet.’

Avery’s already wandered off, absently raking apart the house with his eyes and calculating the worth. That leaves Sam to fix the blinds while smothering the nervous hitch in his chest because this isn’t how his break-ins work. Avery really is ruining it. Sam has his methods, his routine, and afterwards he gets to feel safe and calm. He gets to snatch a few hours where his pulse isn’t hammering a tattoo against his skull. Where he can breathe. An invisible boy living in an empty house.

Avery is anything but invisible.

Now he’s trawling through the house, flipping light switches and touching everything and giving a running commentary on prices they could fetch at the pawnshop.

It’s a comfortable home, the kind for people who can afford holidays. Small bedrooms, soft rugs on the floors, walls with framed photos of awkward teens and golden retrievers, and a large TV with an admirable gaming collection. Avery pets it excitedly. Sam says no way in hell.

Sam leaves his backpack on the kitchen table and moves through the house. He flicks through calendars and notes on a desk, searching for evidence of how long this family will be gone. When they'll come back. He finds a flight itinerary in the rubbish.

A week.

He could have a week in this house.

But just to be sure, he checks: pet food dishes? None. Evidence of a house sitter? None. Food in the fridge? Nothing fresh.

The house is his.

His shoulders relax a fraction.

Avery sprawls on a recliner in the lounge, hitting a lever that snaps the footrest up and down with loud clacks. Sam leaves him to it while he decides what to steal.

He didn't always rob the houses. Back when he was fourteen and so desperate for a house again, a *home*, he just broke in to sleep in the beds. Eat the food. Pretended he could keep this. Pathetic idiot.

Then he started taking keys. To remember each house by.

Then he started taking money. Then jewellery. Laptops. Cameras. Phones. Hidden credit cards.

Avery gets rid of the stuff, courtesy of his shifty friends, but he balks at coming along. Except tonight, apparently.

What did you do now, Avery?

Sam just fixed Avery's last screw-up. He's not ready for another.

Sam reaches for his backpack (the collection of keys is one odd habit he keeps to himself because Avery would touch everything and the keys are special, OK? They're his) but Avery appears from behind the pantry door. He holds up a packet and a distinct look of horror crosses his face. 'What the hell,' he says, 'are *seaweed crackers*?'

Sam sighs. 'Are you staying all night?'

Avery busts the packet and peers inside. 'These are diseased. Anyway, I want to—'
He looks up. 'Oh. Your face.'

Sam should've gone straight to a mirror to inspect the damage. He needs to soak his knuckles and put antiseptic on the cuts, but he forgot since he's used to feeling like a rug with the dust beaten out.

Avery pulls himself up to sit on the bench top next to an empty fruit bowl and crushes crackers between his fingertips instead of eating them. 'You said you were going to stop beating people up.' The accusatory edge is there.

Something in Sam's chest tugs, like he's a boy made out of paper and string and the threads have been pulled too tight. 'Leave it.' His voice stays low.

Avery doesn't notice Sam's tone, he hardly ever does. His legs swing, pace growing frantic. Sam needs to intervene before agitation turns to panic and he spins out.

'You said you'd stop hitting,' Avery says, 'and I'd promise to keep my job at the mechanic's. Those are the rules.' Crackers crunch. Packet rustles. Heels drum on the bench.

'I guess we both broke the rules,' Sam says quietly.

Avery's eyes widen. 'But I—'

'Save it. I know you drove a car into the wall at the mechanic's shop.'

'I didn't—'

'Were you drunk?' Sam's scowl is all flint, but wasted on Avery because he's looking anywhere but Sam's face.

Avery snaps his fingers by his ears and doesn't answer.

This is all so unfair.

Sam can still see the other apprentice mechanic in oily coveralls splayed out on the cement behind the shop, holding his broken hand and whimpering. Sam didn't mean to take it

so far, but does he ever? He went there to beat up the guy, make him unable to work for a day or two so the boss wouldn't fire Avery. He'd need him. Avery would have a chance to redeem himself. It was *simple* – until bone snapped and Sam got a split lip and a boot imprint on his chest and limped off into the dark before the apprentice could see his face or call for help.

The guy was big, but Sam's good at fighting. Practice.

It scares Avery, the way Sam hits. It scares Sam too. But what's he supposed to *do*? He's got nothing else. He doesn't get to spin into a screaming heap when it gets too much like Avery does – Avery who's wired a little different, Avery who acts like he's younger instead of two years older than Sam.

'I'm probably going to get fired.' Avery throws the crumpled packet in the sink and swings his legs viciously. 'But I had this genius idea.' His voice lightens, a good indication the idea is terrible. 'See, there's this super sweet sedan in the shop right now. We'll have hours before anyone knows we took it.'

'Took it where?' Sam's voice is tight.

And Avery says, 'We could leave town,' like it's the easiest thing in the world.

'In a stolen car? Are you *insane*?'

'We'd ditch it tomorrow. Get another. I know cars. No big deal.'

'That's not part of our plan,' Sam says.

'Our plan sucks.' Avery rocks on the bench. 'It's impossible. Let's just drive away. You. And me. We.' He smiles then, small but unguarded, like he really thinks Sam is going to go for this.

Doesn't he know Sam at all?

Sam looks down at his hands, fisted and trembling. He's furious at the hot tears pricking the back of his nose. He wills himself to be still, find that pocket of calm. 'We made

a plan.’ His voice shakes in an effort to stay level. ‘We’re going to earn money, get a house, fix ourselves up—’

‘I’m not even eighteen. And you’re a *wanted* criminal. There’s no way we’ll ever steal enough for a house of our own.’

This is not what they talked about. This is not what they spent countless hours planning last year, lying on the trampoline in their aunt’s backyard because she’d locked them outside again.

We’re going to live in our own house. We’re going to be OK.

‘No.’ But there are too many cracks in Sam’s voice. ‘No, we’re not stealing some car and we’re not leaving town and—’ He stops because it’s all crashing into him. How unrealistic his wishes are. How naive he’s being. He’s supposed to be the one with his head screwed on, but he’ll chase this dream until it cuts him to ribbons.

It’s hard to breathe, but he’s not sure if that’s his bruised ribs or the agony of fighting with his brother.

Avery’s voice grows shrill. ‘But if we stay the police will catch you! I can’t let them catch you. They’ll put you in p-prison and then – I can’t ... you *can’t*—’ It ends in a frantic cry and Avery’s fingers rip at his hair and then suddenly he’s off the bench, knocking the fruit bowl as he goes.

It splinters against the tiles like a gunshot.

Someone’s going to hear.

The shouts.

The crashes.

The brothers.

Avery flinches away, knocking into a chair so hard it flies backwards and hits the wall, leaves an indent in the plaster. This is Avery. Unintentional chaos.

Sam just watches, frozen, while Avery recoils from the mess, his tics exploding until he punches his own leg and gasps furiously for air. Sam tries to reach out, catch his brother's arm and stroke it until he stops hurting himself and swaps to a calmer tic – like he did when they were kids – but Avery snaps away.

'I'll leave then.' His thin chest moves in and out, too fast. 'I'll steal a car and drive away by myself. You c-can get caught if you want. I don't care. I don't care!' He shoves Sam then, and Sam sucks in a sharp breath.

'Don't say that.' Sam's voice is barely a whisper.

Avery storms towards the door, his limbs jerking like a puppet. He turns back with one last vicious glare – except there are tears in his eyes and his lip trembles. 'I'll leave you.'

Don't ever, ever say that.

He slams the door on his way out.

Sam stares at the chaos, the broken dish and the dent in the wall. The family will come back and never understand what happened here.

Sam doesn't understand.

But he can't stay here now.

He's already shouldering his backpack, the weight of a hundred stolen keys clinking their comforting song. He should run after Avery. Make him calm down, make sure he doesn't hurt himself – make sure he doesn't do anything stupid like try to leave. He didn't mean it, right? They're all each other has. Avery's the only who sees Sammy Lou, the forgotten boy.

I'll leave you.

Sam doesn't take anything on his way out.

That's his secret failure.

He doesn't break into houses because he enjoys stealing. He stalks vacant windows and tricks locks and sleeps in stolen beds because he just wants to be home.

