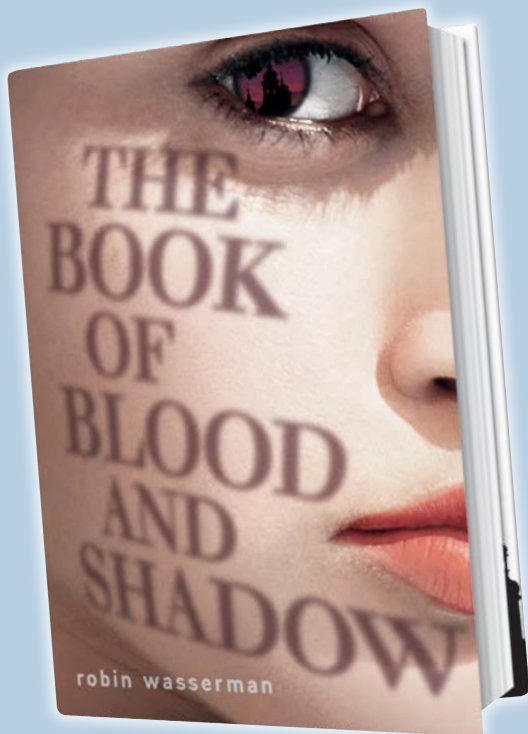


A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eye and lips. The eye is strikingly light, almost white, and contains a dark silhouette of a castle or fortress. The woman has fair skin and is wearing bright red lipstick. The title of the book is printed in a large, dark, serif font across the middle of her face.

THE
BOOK
OF
BLOOD
AND
SHADOW

robin wasserman

Chapter Sample



SECRETS.

CODES.

ONE GIRL
WHO HOLDS
THE KEY.

When the night began, Nora had two best friends and one true love. When it ended, she had nothing but blood on her hands, and a scream ringing in her head.



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1

I should probably start with the blood.

If it bleeds it leads and all that, right? It's all anyone ever wants to know about, anyway. What did it look like? What did it feel like? Why was it all over my hands? And the mystery blood, all those unaccounted-for antibodies, those faceless corkscrews of DNA—who left them behind?

But beginning with that night, with the blood, means that Chris will never be anything more than a corpse, bleeding out all over his mother's travertine marble, Adriane nothing but a dead-eyed head case, rocking and moaning, her clothes soaked in his blood, her face paper white with that slash of red razored into her cheek. If I started there, Max would be nothing but a void. Null space; vacuum and wind.

Maybe that part would be right.

But not the rest of it. Because that wasn't the beginning, any more than it was the end. It was—note the brilliant deductive reasoning at work here—the middle. The center of gravity around which we all spiraled, but none of us could see. The center cannot hold, Max liked to say, back when things were new and quoting poetry seemed a suitably ironic way to declare our love. Things fall apart.

But things don't just fall apart. People break them.

2

In the beginning was the Book.

"Seven hundred years old." The Hoff slammed it down so hard the table rattled. "Imagine that."

Apparently noting our lack of awe, he dropped a liver-spotted fist onto the book with nearly as much force. "Do so now." He swiveled his head to glare at each of us in turn, neck veins bulging with the effort. "Close your eyes. Imagine a scribe in a dark, windowless room. Imagine his quill, scratching across the page, transcribing his secrets—his God, his magic, his power, his blood. Imagine, for just one moment, that *you* will be the one to reach across the ages and make this manuscript yield its treasure." He drew a baby-blue handkerchief from his breast pocket and hocked a thick wad of phlegm into its center. "Imagine what it might be like if your sad, small lives were actually worth something."

I closed my eyes, as ordered. And imagined, in glorious detail, the tortures I would impose on Chris as soon as we escaped from this musty dungeon of mad professors and ancient books.

"Trust me," Chris had said, promising me a genial old man with twinkling grandfather eyes and a Santa laugh. The Hoff was, according to Chris, a bearded marshmallow, hovering on the verge of senility, with little inclination to force his research assistants to show up on time, or, for the most part, show up at all. This was supposed to be my senior-year gift to myself, a thrice-weekly escape from the ever-constricting halls of Chapman Prep into the absentminded bosom of ivy-covered academia, a string of lazy afternoons complete with snacking, lounging, and the occasional nap. Not to mention, Chris had pointed out as my pen hovered over the registration form, "the opportunity to spend quality time with your all-time favorite person, otherwise known

as me." Not that this was in short supply, as his freshman dorm was about a hundred yards from my high school locker. The only problem with the dorm was having to put up with the presence of his roommate, who resolutely kept himself on his side of the room while keeping his owlsh eyes on us.

And now that same roommate stared at me from across the table, the final member of "our intrepid archival team." Another detail Chris had conveniently neglected to mention. Chris assured me that Max didn't *intend* to be creepy, and was, when no one else was watching, almost normal. But then, Chris liked everyone. And his credibility was slipping by the minute.

The Hoff—Chris had coined the nickname last year, when he'd been the one whiling away his senior year with the get-out-of-jail-free pass commonly known as supervised independent study—passed around the Book. "Decades' worth of experts have tried to crack the code," he said as we flipped through page after page of incomprehensible symbols. More than two hundred pages of them, broken only by elaborate illustrations of flowers and animals and astronomical phenomena that apparently had no counterparts in the real world. "Historians, cryptographers, mathematicians, the NSA's best code breakers gave it all they had, but the Voynich manuscript refused to yield. *Mr. Lewis!*"

We all flinched. The Hoff snarled, revealing a mouthful of jagged teeth, sharp as fangs and—judging from his expression—soon to be applied to a similar purpose. "*That is not how one handles a valuable book.*"

Max, who had been rifling through the pages like it was a flip-book, rested his hands flat on the table. Behind his glasses, his eyes were wide. "Sorry," he said quietly. Aside from the soft "Hi" I'd gotten when we were introduced, it was the first time I'd heard him speak.

I cleared my throat. "It's not a valuable book," I told the Hoff.

“It’s a *copy* of a valuable book. If he ruined it, I’m sure he could scrounge up the twenty bucks to pay you back.”

The real thing, with its crumbling seven-hundred-year-old pages and fading seven-hundred-year-old ink, was safely ensconced in a Yale library, eighty miles to the south, where faculty didn’t have to settle for high-school-age researchers or cheap facsimiles. The Hoff closed his eyes for a moment, and I suspected he was putting his own imagination to the test, pretending away whatever scandal had stripped him of his Harvard tenure and dumped him here to rot at a third-rate college in a third-rate college town for the rest of his academic life.

Thanks, Max mouthed, an instant before the Hoff opened his eyes and resumed his glare.

“All books are valuable,” the professor said. But he didn’t press it.

I decided the roommate wasn’t so bad when he smiled.

The meeting lasted for another hour, but the Hoff gave up on his dreamlike rambling and instead stuck to logistics, explaining his significant research and our minimal—“but absolutely essential!”—part in it. He’d just weaseled a collection of letters out of some wealthy widow, and was convinced they contained the secret to decoding the Book. (It was always the *Book* when he spoke of it, capital *B* implicit in the hushed voice, and we followed suit, ironically at first, then later out of habit and grudging respect.) Max and Chris would be put to work indexing and translating the bulk of the collection, searching for clues. I, on the other hand, was assigned a “special” project all my own.

“Most of the letters are written by Edward Kelley,” the Hoff explained. “Personal alchemist to the Holy Roman emperor. Many believe he authored the Book himself. But I believe his contribution is both lesser and greater. I think he got his hands on it, and

solved it. And now we will follow in his footsteps." He pointed at me. "Ms. Kane."

"Nora," I said.

"Ms. Kane, you will deal with the letters written by Kelley's daughter, Elizabeth Weston, which seem to have found their way into the collection by mistake. I doubt they contain anything of use, but nonetheless, we must be thorough."

Unbelievable. I could translate twice as fast and three times as accurately as Chris could, and if the Hoff had even bothered to glance at my Latin teacher's recommendation, he'd know it. "Is this because I'm a woman?"

Chris snorted.

"I can take the Elizabeth letters if Nora doesn't want them," Max said. "It's okay with me."

Thank you, I would have liked to mouth, returning the favor, but the Hoff was watching. And his face was a storm cloud. "I mind. This kind of work requires a certain . . . maturity. Elizabeth's letters will give Ms. Kane ample practice in historical translation while the two of you help me with the real search."

Admittedly, if you'd asked me five minutes earlier, I would have said I didn't care whether I was translating important letters, pointless letters, or a sixteenth-century grocery list. But then the Hoff opened his big, fat, sexist, ageist—whatever *-ist* was con-
scribing me to uselessness—mouth.

"So it's because I'm in high school?" I added. "You know, it's not fair to judge me based on—"

"Do you want to be a member of this team or not, Ms. Kane?"

I could have enlightened him on the difference between *want* and *need*, as in *wanting* to be at Adriane's house mopping up her latest micro-drama, or in Chris's dorm room watching TV (or at least trying to, while pretending not to notice Chris and Adriane

making out behind me and Max doing his spook stare from across the room), basically *wanting* to be anywhere else, but *needing* the credits for graduation and the bullet point for my college applications.

“I do, Professor Hoffpauer.”

“Good.” He stood up and, with stiff, awkward contortions, folded himself into a bulky wool topcoat. “The collection will be waiting here for you tomorrow afternoon. Christopher has a key to the office and will show you proper document-handling protocol.”

“The archive’s not being housed in the rare-books library?” Max asked.

“As if I’d let that harpy get her hands on these?” the Hoff said. He narrowed his eyes. “Not a word to her about this. Or to anyone, for that matter. I won’t have someone taking this away from me. They’re everywhere, you know.”

“Who?” Max asked. Chris just shook his head, knowing better.

“Young man—” The Hoff lowered his voice and leaned toward Max, casting a shadow across the Book. “You don’t want to know.”

It was a close call, but we managed to hold our laughter until he was out of the room.

3

It’s funny how one thing leads you to another, and another, until you end up in the exact place you’re not supposed to be. If it weren’t for Chris, I’d never have ended up in the Hoff’s lair, facing down the Book; if it weren’t for Chapman Prep, there would have been no Chris, or at least no Chris-and-me. And if it weren’t for “wild delinquent Andy Kane” getting wasted, stealing a car, and plowing it into a tree with “much-beloved local beauty

Catherine Li” and, “in one tragic moment,” turning them both into drunken roadkill (reportage courtesy of that bastion of objectivity, the *Chapman Courier*), I’d never have set foot in Chapman Prep. Put another way: If my brother had managed to keep his hands off Catherine Li, Catherine Li’s booze, and Catherine Li’s father’s Mercedes, Chris probably wouldn’t be dead.

Funny.

4

Chris is dead.

It’s ridiculously easy to forget. Or at least to imagine away. Sometimes, at least.

5

Until the September I turned fifteen—the September I enrolled in Chapman Prep—my life could be divided pretty neatly into two eras. Before Dead Brother; After Dead Brother. BDB, I was the youngest in a family of four, father a Latin professor, mother a part-time bookstore manager, both of them teetering on the edge of divorce but sticking together, in that noble tradition of post-boomer bourgeoisie, *for the kids*. ADB, there were still four of us, it was just that one—the only one anyone cared about anymore—happened to be dead.

Not that my parents went crazy. No alcoholism, no untouchable shrines, no unused place settings at the dinner table, no fortunes spent on séances and psychic hotlines, and definitely no elaborate gothic madness of ghostly hallucinations, midnight keening, bumps in the night, or any of that. There was the time, a few months after it happened, that my mother took the pills. But we don’t talk about that.

No, for the lion's share of ADB, we were a resolutely normal family without even the expected residual dusting of crazy. We visited his grave with appropriate frequency. We repurposed his room within an appropriate number of months. We reminisced with an appropriate level of misty-eyed regret. And we didn't talk about the time with the pills, any more than we talked about my father losing his job because he refused to leave the house or my mother transforming herself into an administrative assistant, the only one in the state of Massachusetts who worked twenty-four hours a day, because apparently even typing up loan applications for an obese bank manager who liked to play secretarial grab-and-peek was preferable to being home. ADB, I got extremely proficient in listening at doorways, which is the only way I learned about the third mortgage they'd taken on the house. It confirmed my suspicions: BDB, they may have been staying together for the sake of the children, but ADB, they were staying together for Andy. More specifically, for the dead Andy who lived in the stucco walls he'd scratched with his sixth-grade bike and the hardwood floors he'd mutilated with his third-grade candle-making kit, and every other scuff, wound, and scar fifteen years of casual destruction had left behind. Imminent bankruptcy and domestic discord or not, neither doting parent would ever leave him behind. I came along with the package.

As much fun as it was at home ADB, school was even better. Under the best of circumstances, middle school is a sixth-circle-of-hell situation, sandwiched somewhere between flaming tombs and flesh-eating harpies. It's the kind of situation that doesn't need gasoline on the fire, especially when said gasoline comes in the form of your older brother murdering the older sister of the third-most popular girl in school. Jenna Li's grief was glamorous. She was a glossy-eyed tragic figure, a damsel in distress with girls fighting over who got to stroke her hair and hold her hand and

ply her with comfortingly double-stuffed Oreos. Whereas I didn't cry, I didn't have silky hair, and my brother was a murderer. A drunken idiot of a murderer who wasn't around to blame. It didn't exactly boost me up the social ladder.

Only one constant spanned the chasm between the two eras, and that was Latin. Other five-years-olds practiced piano or took ballet; I memorized declensions and recited mnemonics. Andy rebelled when he was nine and forged our parents' signatures on the permission slip for after-school soccer, but I played the good girl and went along with it, three afternoons a week, *amo, amas, amat*. Whether because I liked the attention, because I was too big a wuss to say no, or because I couldn't resist the opportunity to make my brother look bad, I don't remember. But it certainly wasn't because I liked Latin.

Then Andrew did his thing. And my father stopped leaving the house. Stopped, for the most part, leaving his office, where he hypothetically was burrowed in with nebulous translation projects but was more frequently—we knew but never acknowledged—doing crossword puzzles, ignoring bills, or cradling his head in his hands and staring sightlessly at the family photo on the corner of his desk. He rarely came out and even more rarely let us in, but the door still opened for Latin lessons, and, for that one hour a day, three times a week, the invisible man became visible—or maybe I became invisible, and therefore tolerable. We hunched over the translations, speaking of nothing but a tricky indicative or an ablative that should have been locative, and sometimes, especially when I got good enough to race him to the answer and occasionally win, he rested a hand on my shoulder.

It would have been pathetic if I'd stuck with it just to wring a few drops of parenting from dear old absentee dad, and so I told myself it had nothing to do with him, or us, or Andy, who watched all our lessons from that photo on the corner of the desk,

his smugly upturned lip seeming to say that he knew what I was doing, even if I wouldn't admit it. I told myself it was the language that drew me in, the satisfaction of arranging words like mathematical constructs, adding and subtracting until a solution dropped out. Self-delusion or not, it stuck. Latin became my refuge, until the September I turned fifteen, the September I woke up and found myself the same age as my older brother, when it became my salvation.

6

Chapman is still authentically small-town enough to have a right and wrong side of the tracks, although in this case, the tracks are a Walmart. Our house, along with the cheap gas station, the check-cashing depot, and the so-called park, which had more used condoms and broken meth pipes than it did trees, lay on the southern side. Chapman Prep—a palatial stone idyll adjacent to the college campus and in easy walking distance of two Italy-certified gelateria, three high-end stationery stores, four yuppie baby-clothes outposts, and a candle-making shoppe with twice-daily do-it-yourself demonstrations in the back—was comfortably ensconced in the north. And never the twain would have met, were it not for the application I sent for in desperation, the scholarship for local students with excessive need, and Latin placement test scores that—I found out later—had the classics teacher drooling all over his copy of the *Aeneid* and the dean of discipline convinced I'd found a way to scrawl the contents of a Latin-English dictionary on the bottom of my Converse. The acceptance arrived in April, the scholarship money landed in July, and in September my parents pretended to be proud as I headed out for my first day as a Chapman Prep sophomore.

So I was the new girl, at a school where there hadn't been a

new girl in two years, and that went about how you'd expect. Fortunately I wasn't in the market for friends. All I'd wanted was a place where no one knew me and no one knew Andy—which might have been why, during the first obligatory small-talk exchange with a girl in my chem class, I said I was an only child.

It just popped out.

I saw my mother hit with it once, not long after it happened. Just some guy in line at the bank, trying to be polite. "How many children do you have?" For a few seconds, my mother did her fish-mouth thing—open shut open—and then the tears started leaking out. The guy felt so guilty he offered my mother a job, and the rest is secretarial history.

I didn't cry. I smiled at the blond girl whose name I couldn't remember and said, "No sisters, no brothers, just me," and then she started complaining about her twin baby sisters and their tendency to drool all over her homework, and that was the end of it. People don't ask questions because they care about the answers. They're only talking to fill up the silence.

I didn't notice the guy sitting at the lab table behind us—which is to say, I noticed him, because even on day one it was clear this was the kind of guy you noticed, but I didn't notice he was listening.

I noticed him again, shadowing me in the hall as I tried to find my way from chemistry to Latin, and then again, passing into the classroom in step with me and grabbing a seat next to mine. Admittedly, the odds were working in my favor on this front, since the loose semicircle contained only five chairs, but the rest were empty, so he could have sat anywhere. It required conscious and vaguely incomprehensible effort to plant himself next to the new girl with cheap jeans, a pancake chest, and hair that defied any description but mousy brown. I told myself I deserved some good luck, overlooking the fact that it would call for substantially

more than luck to thrust me into one of those narratives where plain-Jane new girl catches the eye of inexplicably single Prince Charming, because somehow the new school has revealed her wild, irresistible beauty, of which she was never before aware.

Spoiler alert: Chris had a girlfriend. An endless string of them, in fact. Which I guessed from the way he leaned back in his chair, slinging a long arm over the empty one next door, the posture of a guy who's used to having someone to hold on to. So I adjusted the fairy tale to accommodate a damaged Prince Charming who distracted himself from his pain by dating girls unworthy of him, unconsciously reserving himself for his true love and savior—namely, me—and smiled.

“Nora, right?” he said.

I nodded. His eyes were a deep brown, several shades darker than his face, and I suspected they'd be well suited to the purpose of gazing lovingly, if, hypothetically, such a need ever came up.

“Andrew Kane's sister?”

I stopped smiling.

“Chris.” He tapped his chest, then waited, as if he'd forgotten his line and was expecting me to fill it in for him. When I didn't, he added, “Chris Moore? JFK Middle? I was in sixth when you were in fifth.” He paused again. “Andy helped coach my soccer team.”

I made a noise, a *hmm* or an *um*, and wondered how long I could keep from having to respond. I remembered him now, dimly, as one of the many to make out with Jenna Li behind the cafeteria, and it seemed suddenly possible that she'd spread her minions across the globe—or at least the town—with orders to deliver her revenge.

“He was cool,” Chris said. Then, “Sorry. About what happened. That must have sucked.”

Another *hmm*.

“I moved cross town that year,” he said. “That's probably why

you don't remember me. Been at Prep ever since. So what do you think of it so far?"

I shrugged.

"Hey. Listen. It's probably none of my business, but . . ."

I steeled myself.

"I heard what you said to Julianne." He must have caught my brow furrow at the name. "In chem class?" he added. "When she asked about brothers or sisters? That's when I recognized you. And you told her . . ." He hesitated, picking at the stiff cuff of his button-down shirt, preppy even for Prep. "Actually, I was right the first time. None of my business." He reached out a hand. "Better idea. New school, new start, right? Meeting again for the first time. Chris Moore."

I took his hand, shaking it firmly. "Nora Kane."

We were still locked together when a ridiculously pretty girl—long black hair, almond-shaped eyes, long legs jutting from a short skirt, the works—danced through the door, dropped to her knees before us, and propped her elbows on Chris's desk. "So, what are we talking about?"

"Filling New Girl in on the highs and lows of life at Prep," Chris said. I realized I'd been holding my breath. But he passed the test. "I warned her there's still time to go back where she came from, but she refuses to listen. You want to tell her?"

The girl laughed. "I think you've just met the low." She gave Chris the kind of light shove you deploy when you're looking for an excuse to touch someone. "Now meet the high."

I'd never understood girls like her—as in, literally couldn't comprehend how they achieved perfection by seven a.m., hair sleek and dry, lip gloss and mascara and foundation and the variety of cosmetics of whose existence I remained unaware masterfully applied, accessories matched to sartorial selection matched to freshly polished nails. Whereas I inevitably showed up to school late, with

tangled, wet, and, several months of the year, frozen hair tucked into a lopsided bun, my socks mismatched, and, on truly special occasions, some hastily applied drugstore foundation that couldn't disguise the fact that my nose was slightly too big for my face. My mother had once thought it would be comforting to explain that beauty—and the grace and confidence that nurture it—requires money. She added no maternal assurances about natural beauty, true beauty, or inner beauty and which, if any, I might possess, while I elected not to point out that money wasn't the only thing I didn't have. A mother who bothered to show me how to put on eye shadow might also have come in handy.

"Adriane Ames," Chris said as the remaining two students filtered into the classroom and grabbed seats. "Feel free to disregard ninety percent of everything she says."

"And the other ten?" I asked.

"Pure genius. Or so she tells me."

"I also tell him to get a haircut," she said, brushing manicured fingers across the tight curls that were blossoming into an Afro. "But does he listen?"

I liked his hair. "Clearly that fell into the ninety percent," I said. "The odds really aren't in your favor."

She laughed again, a surprisingly abrasive sound for such a delicate frame. Her voice was musical, but her laugh was pure noise. "She's cute," Adriane said. "Can we keep her?"

They could; they did.

7

Chris never told anyone about Andy, and neither did I. As if knowing that he knew meant I could pretend it had never happened, because it wasn't really lying if Chris knew the truth.

He wasn't with Adriane, not then. But he was at the top of her

agenda and, as quickly became clear, items on the agenda never lay fallow for long. It turned out he was the reason she'd taken advanced Latin in the first place; I was the reason she passed it. That's where it happened, somewhere in between declensions and Lucretian soliloquies and cheesy "Ancient Romans Go to Market" skits, Chris and I fell in like, and Chris and Adriane—with my Cyranoesque assistance—fell in love. So I had a best friend and soon, by virtue of the transitive property of social addition (girl has best friend plus best friend has new girlfriend equals girl has new best friend, *quod erat demonstrandum*), I had two. Chris and I got Adriane through advanced Latin, Adriane and I got Chris through remedial chem, the two of them got me through the new-girl phase with a minimum of muss and fuss, and for two years we were, if no happier than the average high school student juggling APs and SATs and extracurriculars and defective parents, at least not miserable, and not alone. Then Chris went to college (albeit, via the path of least resistance, down the street), I found Max, we all found the Book, and everything went to hell.

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