

EVERYTHING LED TO ONE DEADLY MOMENT...

THE NIGHT IT ENDED

A NOVEL

KATIE GARNER

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Praise for The Night It Ended

“*The Night It Ended* is a dark gothic murder investigation at a mysterious school for troubled girls, but don’t judge, don’t assume, don’t try to figure it out—just let Garner’s masterful sleight of hand carry you away through the gasp-worthy twists and turns. Do not miss this!”

—Hank Phillippi Ryan, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *The House Guest*

“A gorgeously atmospheric dark academic thriller set at a snowy boarding school so vividly rendered you can practically feel the frost freezing your blood. Garner centers female rage in the most delicious and page-turning of ways, plunging readers into a world where women’s machinations, conspiracies, anger, and even violence rule all.”

—Ashley Winstead, author of *The Last Housewife*

“*The Night It Ended* is dark, twisted, and utterly compelling. You won’t know who or what to believe and the creepy location will have you looking over your shoulder more than once. One heck of a debut with an ending that left me speechless.”

—Hannah Mary McKinnon, internationally bestselling author of *Never Coming Home*

“Disarmingly sensory, with plot twists that are sure to give readers whiplash, Garner has done a phenomenal job of giving us just enough information to think we know where the story is going, only to pull the rug out from under us—over and over again. A nail-bitingly spectacular debut!”

—Amanda Jayatissa, author of *You’re Invited*

“Compulsively readable. Brilliant use of the unreliable narrator. I enjoyed the police interviews interwoven with the present-day mystery. It kept me on my toes. And that last plot twist...amazing. I did not see it coming.”

—Amber Garza, author of *When I Was You*

“Katie Garner’s debut novel is a chilly, twisty ride—think dark academia

meets Gillian Flynn. *The Night It Ended* is both a brooding Gothic mystery set at a boarding school for wayward girls and a jittery domestic thriller and just when you think you've got a handle on the story, Garner pulls the rug out from under you. I couldn't put it down."

—Halley Sutton, author of *The Lady Upstairs*

Katie Garner was born in New York and grew up in New Jersey. She has a degree in art history from Ramapo College and is certified to teach high school art. She hoards paperbacks, coffee mugs and dog toys, and can be seen holding at least one of those things most of the time. Katie lives with her husband, baby boy and shih-poo in a New Jersey river town, where she writes books about women and their dark, secret selves.

KatieGarnerAuthor.com

The Night It Ended

Katie Garner



For Graham

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THE YEAR BEFORE

FILE NAME: JPN00.012.00030923.mp3

[00:00:00]

INT: Are you ready to begin? Remember, I'm on your side to try to get to the bottom of this. I want to prove you're innocent in all this, okay?

RES: [inaudible] I understand.

INT: ... Great. So, uh, I'm going to ask you simple, easy questions. Just take your time. We'll go nice and easy.

RES: Okay.

INT: First, uh, please state your name.

RES: My name is [redacted].

INT: And I'm [redacted], working on behalf of the [redacted] Police Department. Please remember, no matter what we discuss, that I am on your side. Okay?

RES: Okay.

INT: So, let's get started. Today is Monday, December 13, 2021. The time is 0-4-0-3-P-M. Okay, um, [redacted], let's start from the beginning. Let's start with how you met [redacted].

RES: How I met him?

[00:01:35]

INT: Yes, just walk me through. When did you meet? How?

RES: [inaudible] We met about...maybe, six months ago.

INT: And what was your relationship, when you first met [redacted], before it progressed?

RES: We—he was...my husband is an attorney. Um, he works a lot. We were happy.

INT: [redacted], this works best if you're honest with me. Okay? Look at me, hey, I need you to be honest with me. I know it's painful. I know. I do. But you have to trust me. You have to promise me you will be honest and you will trust me.

RES: Okay. Yeah. I'll be honest. I promise.

Friday, December 16

I'm speeding home when the phone rings, persistent and angry, demanding to be heard. I know I should answer it, even though I want nothing more than to throw it out the window. I could let the call slide into voice mail, delete it, never hear the voice on the other side.

But I can't.

I jerk to the side of the icy road to a chorus of blaring horns, dig the phone out from the cavernous tote bag resting on the passenger seat beside me. The phone is sleek and black, brand-new—opposite of the cracked, chunky white one I'm used to shoving in my back pocket.

A sweet little chime and the ringing ends.

1 new voice mail.

Quickly, I glance in the side mirror. Car exhaust melts away into the morning winter sky. Nothing is behind me, nothing but air. I exhale a deep sigh of relief, press the phone to my ear.

“H-hi, this message is for Dr. Madeline Pine—”

A siren wails in the distance. The phone slips through my fingers, lands mutely in my lap. A knot swells in my throat. I glance in the side mirror again, feel my heart pound, each breath shrinking to tiny gasps. The sirens near. An emergency vehicle speeds past.

It's only an ambulance.

My body wilts. I take a deep breath. *In. Out.* The knot in my throat loosens.

I hate the person I've become. I've never been this nervous, this afraid, anxiety and fear clinging to my every move. I wish I could escape—step into someone else's life, if only for a moment.

Just twelve short months ago everything was different. *I was different.* Any other December, I would've been home, prepping for the holidays, shopping online for last-minute deals on things none of us needed. My husband, Dave, would be staying too late at work, his dinner wrapped in a blanket of aluminum foil, kept warm on the stove. My teenage daughter, Izzi, would be upstairs in her room, scrolling noiselessly through her phone, feet kicked up on the bed behind her.

The house would've hummed with the steady softness of disjointed home life, but instead here I am, lurched to the side of the road, the air frigid in the tiny cabin of my car, listening to a voice mail I never thought I'd hear.

I replay the message:

“H-hi, this message is for Dr. Madeline Pine. If you get this, I’m Matthew Reyes, a private investigator working on behalf of a family. Listen, I was hoping you could please call me back at this number, I—I’d really appreciate it. We have a sixteen-year-old female who died on school property. The police believe it’s an accident, but the mother hired me to be sure. The girl was found at the bottom of a hill. No witnesses. I thought you might be able to help—given your expertise. Please call me back. Thanks.”

I repeat his words in my head. *The girl was found at the bottom of a hill*—I can picture it, picture her. She’s there, fallen sideways, her body splashed across the woodland floor. Moss and stones, skin and blood, leaves and twigs. I don’t know her, but I don’t have to. I already feel as if she were mine.

The man who left the voice mail, Matthew Reyes, has a voice both gravelly and weary, and I know what he wants the moment he mentions the school. Police often believe they can demand anything they want and get it immediately—even psychological evaluations—but it takes time to gain trust from strangers, and even more time to tease out the truth. Especially from teenage girls.

I start weighing my options. I’m not sure I’m capable of this, of anything. Especially after last year...especially after what just happened in that too-hot office during this morning’s disastrous therapy session.

My face flushes at the memory of the woman who’d been sitting cross-legged in front of me. Her beautiful face. Her pink silk shirt blurring out of focus. Her condescending tone—as though the therapy sessions weren’t all for her benefit to begin with.

That’s what I have to remind myself. That’s what I have to hold on to. They’re for *her*. Not me. *I’m* the one who’s fine. I should be taking comfort in that, taking comfort in the fact that I never have to see her beautiful face again, never have to be reminded of—

It’s over. I didn’t have a choice before. Now I do. I have lots of choices. An avalanche of choices. My life before today was preprogrammed for me. Not anymore. I fixed it.

Tears slip down my cheeks. I bite them back, strangle the phone in my lap, squeeze it so tight I wonder how it fails to snap in two. *Choices. Possibilities.*

My mind whirls as I punch the gas, merge into traffic, race home. I run inside, slam the door, bolt the lock. Gazing around my gloom-infested house, I shrivel back as wind blows branches of a nearby tree, scraping the

side of the house like fingernails.

Peering at the bulging paper bag of prescriptions on the kitchen island, my eyes prick with tears. My glasses fog. I take them off, rub the lenses clean on my turtleneck.

After so many months, the pills should be working. I should stop taking them altogether. Just throw them all in the toilet, flush them down, watch them whirl around the porcelain bowl.

I think of words my daughter, Izzi, said to me: *Mom, please just stop. Stop.*

I don't know the person I've become, too empty, too full, all at once. I need to change. I want to be different. Every day, I think of ways I can be. It can still happen. I'm free now. I have choices now, possibilities. Maybe it's never too late to change everything. Maybe I just need to escape.

Besides, wiggle room is all it takes for a snake to get out of its skin.

The phone rings again. I snuff the urge to hurl it across the room before glancing at the screen. It's the same number as before. The same number as the voice mail. I hold my breath and answer.

"Hello?"

"Hello—is this Dr. Madeline Pine?"

"Um—yes. It is." My heart thuds. "Who's this?"

A sigh of relief, deep and heavy, into the phone. "This is private investigator Matthew Reyes. Thank you so much for answering, Dr. Pine. I—I know it's a chaotic time of year and you're probably busy with family but...would you be able to make a trip up to Iron Hill?"

"I—I don't know where that is."

"It's about two hours north of Poughkeepsie. Upstate New York."

"Right, okay." *Far. Very far.* Too far for my ailing car to make it. I know I should just buy a new one, but I can't. My husband Dave always said the color perfectly matched my eyes. Now I can't even remember the last time we looked at each other.

"So, are you busy this weekend?" Reyes asks, then pauses. "I mean, you're sure you don't mind ditching your family right before the holidays?"

"When you put it that way, it sounds horrible." *Awkward laugh.* "But, um, my husband and daughter aren't home now, anyway—they've gone away to visit my in-laws."

"You have no idea how grateful I'd be if you could make it," he says, sounding hopeful. I don't know what he looks like, but I can imagine him smiling. "I mean, I've been calling around to different psychologists all day, and—well, it should only be for a couple of days. You'd definitely be

back by Christmas, *the latest.*”

I wince, feel a surge of sorrow. I’m too embarrassed to admit that Dave and Izzi have no intention of spending the holidays with me this year. It’s what I deserve after what I did.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “please refresh my memory. Have we ever met? You said you’re a private investigator hired by the victim’s—er, the deceased’s—family?”

“Yes, I mean, we haven’t met, but I read about the work you did on the Strum case last year. I believe one of the victims was around the same age as our current victim. And I pulled up your book online—*Dark Side: A Psychological Portrait of the Criminal Female Mind*. You specialize in women. Just so happens the case is at an all-girls boarding school.”

My stomach clenches. *Focus. Deep breath.* I shift my gaze to the calendar hanging in the kitchen. I don’t even know why I bother to keep one anymore. I have the same schedule now, week in, week out. Before, the month of December would’ve been filled with holiday office parties, Izzi’s end-of-year school activities, Dave’s plans for winter break, which I’d always beg him to change.

I glance up. Friday, December 16. This morning’s therapy session slashes across my mind again. I see her face. Blank, empty. Her lips begin to curl around a word. I see myself in the reflection of her eyes. I’m close. Closer. I swallow hard.

“The, um, the students don’t go home for the holidays?” I ask, slumping down to the floor.

“Winter break is Saturday, the tenth to New Year’s. A few students stayed behind.” Reyes pauses. “The students who either couldn’t travel for various reasons or chose not to go home.”

I lean the back of my head against the wall.

Reyes continues. “The school is asking me to wrap up my investigation before students and staff return January 2.”

“Okay...”

He senses my discomfort, keeps talking. “Please. *Please* say yes. You mentioned you have a daughter. How would you feel if it were her?” he asks. “If she was found dead, you’d want closure, right? To be sure everything was done by the book and no stone was left unturned.”

My stomach flips. “Of course I would.”

“So, please. Please say you’ll help.”

I think of my daughter, Izzi, the lengths I’d go to if she was found at the bottom of a hill. Even if it was an accident, I’d want to know why. I’d want to know how she got there. If she was alone. Afraid. Or if someone

else was responsible. I'd want to know. I'd find them, I'd—

"I don't know if I can do this," I confess.

I shut my eyes, see *her* face again, legs crossed, sitting prim in that too-hot office, the heat blasting, the furniture too big for the tiny space. I tug at the neck of my sweater, suddenly tight, see my reflection in her eyes—close, so close.

No. Stop. I suck up a big breath, blow it all out.

"I don't know if you're aware, but after that case last year—" My voice cracks.

"The Strum case?" A note of curiosity in Reyes's question.

"Yeah. Since then, things have been difficult. I ended up taking some time off—"

"I—I wasn't aware. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It just—it makes cases like this difficult."

"Oh—"

"But before I say yes or no, can you give me an overview? What, exactly, I'll be doing when I get there? I want to be sure I know what I'm stepping into."

Reyes lets out a breath. "Yeah—yes, of course," he says, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Well, it happened at a private, all-girls boarding school called Shadow Hunt Hall. They have a very small student body on a very large campus. It's densely wooded and incredibly isolated. It's one of those 'back-to-nature, no technology on campus' sort of places. The girls are mostly... I guess the best word for it is—troubled?"

"Isn't that the best kind of girl?"

"Uh, here," he says, ignoring my attempt at a joke. "I'll send you some info."

I glance at the screen, see he's texted a link to the school's website. I tap it open, swipe down the page. The school is ancient. Giant and stone, with iron gates and actual turrets, like a possessed fairy-tale castle. The curriculum looks interesting. Definitely nontraditional. It's all music and arts and dance. I skim the mission statement:

We believe in a holistic, individual approach to learning and rehabilitation, focusing on a curriculum centered on nature, group trust, and a healthy mind-body connection.

Code words for no junk food or internet.

Reyes waits patiently on the other end as I peruse the site. I click on the Tuition & Financial Aid page and flinch. A single term is more than twice the down payment we put on the house.

"You there? Dr. Pine?"

I lick my lips. "I'm here."

He pauses. "I'm having trouble getting any of the students to even talk to me," he admits. "That's why I need you."

I think of Izzi, chewing on her fingernails, avoiding eye contact when I ask how her day went. Ever since she started high school it's been all one-word answers—*good, fine*—before she'd bound upstairs, not to be seen again until dinner.

So I can't imagine how the girls at this boarding school would react to a male private investigator showing up out of nowhere, prodding them with questions right after their classmate died. No doubt they'd recoil, want nothing to do with him.

"Okay... I'll help you," I whisper.

I have choices. An avalanche of choices. I'm free.

Finally, it's time to escape.

"Just one more question, then I'm all yours," I say.

"Sure, you can ask me anything."

"You mentioned in your voice mail how the police believe the girl's death was an accident."

"Right."

"Do you have any reason to believe her death *wasn't* an accident? You said her mother isn't so sure—do you agree with her?"

Reyes pauses. In the background, a car engine starts. "Let's just say there are some things that don't add up. I'll explain more when you get here, but there is something I should make you aware of..." He trails off.

"What?"

"The school has been locked down for the remainder of winter break. No one in. No one out."

"Except you," I say.

"Except me."

"Security is a good thing when you believe there might have been a murder," I say.

"I never said it was a murder."

I hesitate, gulp, crawl up from the floor.

"Right, sorry."

Reyes pauses. I can practically hear his mind working. "Don't be," he says quietly. "Because I think you're right."

"What?"

"I can't explain it all now, but something happened here," he says. "Something awful. And if this student *was* murdered—her killer is still inside the school."