

FREDRIK BACKMAN

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
A MAN CALLED OVE

US AGAINST YOU

A NOVEL

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US
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- A NOVEL -

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated by Neil Smith

ATRIA BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For Neda. I'm still trying to impress you. Just so you know.

It's Going to Be Someone's Fault

Have you ever seen a town fall? Ours did. We'll end up saying that violence came to Beartown this summer, but that will be a lie; the violence was already here. Because sometimes hating one another is so easy that it seems incomprehensible that we ever do anything else.

We're a small community in the forest; people say that no roads lead here, just past. The economy coughs every time it takes a deep breath; the factory cuts its workforce each year like a child that thinks no one will notice the cake in the fridge getting smaller if you take a little bit from each side. If you lay a current map of the town over an old one, the main shopping street and the little strip known as "the center" seem to shrink like bacon in a hot pan. We have an ice rink but not much else. But on the other hand, as people usually say here: What the hell else do you need?

People driving through say that Beartown doesn't live for anything but hockey, and some days they may be right. Sometimes people have to be allowed to have something to live for in order to survive everything else. We're not mad, we're not greedy; say what you like about Beartown, but the people here are tough and hardworking. So we built a hockey team that was like us, that we could be proud of, because we weren't like you. When people from the big cities thought something seemed too hard, we just grinned and said, "It's supposed to be hard." Growing up here wasn't easy; that's why we did it, not you. We stood tall, no matter the weather. But then something happened, and we fell.

There's a story about us before this one, and we're always going to carry the guilt of that. Sometimes good people do terrible things in the belief that they're trying to protect what they love. A boy, the star of the hockey team, raped a girl. And we lost our way. A

community is the sum of its choices, and when two of our children said different things, we believed him. Because that was easier, because if the girl was lying our lives could carry on as usual. When we found out the truth, we fell apart, taking the town with us. It's easy to say that we should have done everything differently, but perhaps you wouldn't have acted differently, either. If you'd been afraid, if you'd been forced to pick a side, if you'd known what you had to sacrifice. Perhaps you wouldn't be as brave as you think. Perhaps you're not as different from us as you hope.

This is the story of what happened afterward, from one summer to the following winter. It is about Beartown and the neighboring town of Hed, and how the rivalry between two hockey teams can grow into a mad struggle for money and power and survival. It is a story about hockey rinks and all the hearts that beat around them, about people and sports and how they sometimes take turns carrying each other. About us, people who dream and fight. Some of us will fall in love, others will be crushed; we'll have good days and some very bad days. This town will rejoice, but it will also start to burn. There's going to be a terrible bang.

Some girls will make us proud; some boys will make us great. Young men dressed in different colors will fight to the death in a dark forest. A car will drive too fast through the night. We will say that it was a traffic accident, but accidents happen by chance, and we will know that we could have prevented this one. This one will be someone's fault.



People we love will die. We will bury our children beneath our most beautiful trees.

There Are Three Types of People

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

The highest point in Beartown is a hill to the south of the last buildings in town. From there you can see all the way from the big villas on the Heights, past the factory and the ice rink and the smaller row houses near the center, right over to the blocks of rental apartments in the Hollow. Two girls are standing on the hill looking out across their town. Maya and Ana. They'll soon be sixteen, and it's hard to say if they became friends in spite of their differences or because of them. One of them likes musical instruments; the other likes guns. Their mutual loathing of each other's taste in music is almost as recurrent a topic of argument as their ten-year-long fight about pets. Last winter they got thrown out of a history class at school because Maya muttered, "You know who was a dog person, Ana? Hitler!" whereupon Ana retorted, "You know who was a cat person, then? Josef Mengele!"

They squabble constantly and love each other unquestioningly, and ever since they were little they have had days when they've felt it was just the two of them against the whole world. Ever since what happened to Maya earlier in the spring, every day has felt like that.

It's the very start of June. For three-quarters of the year this place is encapsulated in winter, but now, for a few enchanted weeks, it's summer. The forest around them is getting drunk on sunlight, the trees sway happily beside the lakes, but the girls' eyes are restless. This time of year used to be a time of endless adventure for them; they would spend all day out in nature and come home late in the evening with torn clothes and dirty faces, childhood in their eyes. That's all gone. They're adults now. For some girls that isn't something you choose, it's something that gets forced upon you.

Bang. Bang. Bang-bang-bang.

A mother is standing outside a house. She's packing her child's things into a car. How many times does that happen while they're growing up? How many toys do you pick up from the floor, how many stuffed animals do you have to form search parties for at bedtime, how many mittens do you give up on at preschool? How many times do you think that if nature really does want people to reproduce, then perhaps evolution should have let all parents grow extra sets of arms so they can reach under all the wretched sofas and fridges? How many hours do we spend waiting in hallways for our kids? How many gray hairs do they give us? How many lifetimes do we devote to their single one? What does it take to be a good parent? Not much. Just everything. Absolutely everything.

Bang. Bang.

Up on the hill Ana turns to her best friend and asks, "Do you remember when we were little? When you always wanted to pretend that we had kids?"

Maya nods without taking her eyes from the town.

"Do you still want kids?" Ana asks.

Maya's mouth barely opens when she replies. "Don't know. Do you?"

Ana shrugs her shoulders slightly, halfway between anger and sorrow. "Maybe when I'm old."

"How old?"

"Dunno. Thirty, maybe."

Maya is silent for a long time, then asks, "Do you want boys or girls?"

Ana replies as if she's spent her whole life thinking about this, "Boys."

"Why?"

"Because the world is kind of shitty toward them sometimes. But it treats us like that nearly all the time."

Bang.

The mother closes the trunk, holding back tears because she knows that if she lets out so much as a single one, they will never stop. No matter how old they get, we never want to cry in front of our children. We'd do anything for them; they never know because they don't understand the immensity of something that is unconditional. A parent's love is unbearable, reckless, irresponsible. They're so small when they sleep in their beds and we sit beside them, shattered to pieces inside. It's a lifetime of shortcomings, and, feeling guilty, we stick happy pictures up everywhere, but we never show the gaps in the photograph album, where everything that hurts is hidden away. The silent tears in darkened rooms. We lie awake, terrified of all the things that can happen to them, everything they might be subjected to, all the situations in which they could end up victims.

The mother goes around the car and opens the door. She's not much different from any other mother. She loves, she gets frightened, falls apart, is filled with shame, isn't enough. She sat awake beside her son's bed when he was three years old, watching him sleep and fearing all the terrible things that could happen to him, just like every parent does. It never occurred to her that she might need to fear the exact opposite.

Bang.

It's dawn, the town is asleep; the main road out of Beartown is empty, but the girls' eyes are still fixed on it from up on the hilltop. They wait patiently.

Maya no longer dreams about the rape. About Kevin's hand over her mouth, the weight of his body stifling her screams, his room with all the hockey trophies on the shelves, the floor the button of her blouse bounced across. She just dreams about the running track behind the Heights now; she can see it from up here. When Kevin was running on his own and she stepped out of the darkness with a shotgun. Held it to his head as he shook and sobbed and begged for mercy. In her dreams she kills him, every night.

Bang. Bang.

How many times does a mother make her child giggle? How many times does the child make her laugh out loud? Kids turn us inside out the first time we realize that they're doing it intentionally, when we discover that they have a sense of humor. When they make jokes, learn to manipulate our feelings. If they love us, they learn to lie shortly after that, to spare our feelings, pretending to be happy. They're quick to learn what we like. We might tell ourselves that we know them, but they have their own photograph albums, and they grow up in the gaps.

How many times has the mother stood beside the car outside the house, checked the time, and impatiently called her son's name? She doesn't have to do that today. He's been sitting silently in the passenger seat for several hours while she packed his things. His once well-toned body is thin after weeks in which she's struggled to get food into him. His eyes stare blankly through the windshield.

How much can a mother forgive her son for? How can she possibly know that in advance? No parent imagines that her little boy is going to grow up and commit a crime. She doesn't know what nightmares he dreams now, but he shouts when he wakes up from them. Ever since that morning she found him on the running track, motionless with cold, stiff with fear. He had wet himself, and his desperate tears had frozen on his cheeks.

He raped a girl, and no one could ever prove it. There will always be people who say that means he got away with it, that his family escaped punishment. They're right, of course. But it will never feel like that for his mother.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

When the car begins to move along the road, Maya stands on the hill and knows that Kevin will never come back here. That she has broken him. There will always be people who say that means she won.

But it will never feel like that to her.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

The brake lights go on for a moment; the mother casts one last glance in the rearview mirror, at the house that was a home and the gluey scraps on the mailbox where the name

“Erdahl” has been torn off, letter by letter. Kevin’s father is packing the other car alone. He stood beside the mother on the track, saw their son lying there with tears on his sweater and urine on his trousers. Their lives had shattered long before then, but that was when she first saw the shards. The father refused to help her as she half carried, half dragged the boy through the snow. That was two months ago. Kevin hasn’t left the house since then, and his parents have barely said a word to each other. Men define themselves in more distinctive ways than women, life has taught her that, and her husband and son have always defined themselves with one single word: winners. As long as she can remember, the father has drummed the same message into the boy: “There are three types of people: winners, losers, and the ones who watch.”

And now? If they’re not winners, what are they? The mother takes her foot off the brake, switches the radio off, drives down the road, and turns the corner. Her son sits beside her. The father gets into the other car, drives alone in the opposite direction. The divorce papers are in the mail, along with the letter to the school saying that the father has moved to another town and the mother and son have gone abroad. The mother’s phone number is at the bottom in case anyone at the school has any questions, but no one’s going to call. This town is going to do everything it can to forget that the Erdahl family was ever a part of it.

After four hours of silence in the car, when they’re so far from Beartown that they can’t see any forest, Kevin whispers to his mother, “Do you think it’s possible to become a different person?”

She shakes her head, biting her bottom lip, and blinks so hard she can’t see the road in front of her. “No. But it’s possible to become a better person.” Then he holds out a trembling hand. She holds it as if he were three years old, as if he were dangling over the edge of a cliff. She whispers, “I can’t forgive you, Kevin. But I’ll never abandon you.”

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

That’s the sound of this town, everywhere. Perhaps you understand that only if you live here.

Bangbangbang.

On the hilltop stand two girls, watching the car disappear. They'll soon be sixteen. One of them is holding a guitar, the other a rifle.

Like a Man

The worst thing we know about other people is that we're dependent upon them. That their actions affect our lives. Not just the people we choose, the people we like, but all the rest of them: the idiots. You who stand in front of us in every line, who can't drive properly, who like bad television shows and talk too loud in restaurants and whose kids infect our kids with the winter vomiting bug at preschool. You who park badly and steal our jobs and vote for the wrong party. You also influence our lives, every second.

Dear God, how we hate you for that.

In the Bearskin pub a number of silent old men are sitting in a row. They're said to be in their seventies but could easily be double that. There are five of them, but they have at least eight opinions, and they're known as the "five uncles" because they always stand by the boards and lie and argue at all the practices at Beartown Ice Hockey Club. Afterward they go to the Bearskin and lie and argue there instead, and occasionally they amuse themselves by trying to trick the others into thinking that senile dementia has crept up on them: they sometimes change one another's house numbers at night and hide their keys when they've had a few drinks. One time four of them towed the fifth one's car out of his driveway and replaced it with an identical rental, just so he would end up terrified that it was finally time to go into a home when he couldn't get the car started the next morning. When they go to games they pay with Monopoly money, and for almost an entire season they all pretended to believe that they were at the 1980 Winter Olympics. Every time they

caught sight of Peter Andersson, the general manager of Beartown Ice Hockey, they spoke to him in German and called him “Hans Rampf.” It slowly drove the GM mad, and that made the five uncles happier than an overtime win. People in the town often say that it’s entirely possible that the uncles are in fact senile now, all five of them, but how the hell would anyone ever be able to prove it?

Ramona, the owner of the Bearskin pub, lines up five whiskies on the bar. There’s only one sort of whisky here, but several types of sorrow. The uncles have followed Beartown Ice Hockey all the way to the top and right down to the bottom of the league system. All their lives. This is going to be their worst day.

Kira Andersson is sitting in her car on her way to the office when her phone rings. She’s feeling stressed for a lot of different reasons. She drops the phone under her seat and swears with a level of anatomical precision that Kira’s husband usually points out would embarrass a gang of drunken sailors. When Kira finally gets hold of the phone it takes the woman at the other end a couple of seconds to recover from the range of expletives.

“Hello?” Kira snaps.

“Yes, sorry, I’m calling from S Express. You emailed to ask for a quote . . . ,” the woman says tentatively.

“From . . . who did you say you were? S Express? No, you must have the wrong number,” Kira says.

“Are you sure? I’ve got the paperwork in front of me here and—” the woman says, but then Kira drops her phone again and launches into a spontaneous description of exactly what sort of genitalia the designer of the phone’s head resembles, and by the time she manages to get hold of it again the woman at the other end has done herself a favor and hung up.

Kira doesn’t think much more about it. She’s expecting a call from her husband, Peter, who’s got a meeting with the regional council about the future of the hockey club today, and her anxiety about the consequences of the meeting is like a band around her stomach

being pulled tighter and tighter. When she tosses the phone onto the passenger seat, the background picture of her daughter, Maya, and son, Leo, glows briefly before the screen goes dark.

Kira drives to work, but if she had stopped the car and looked up “S Express” online she would have seen that it’s a moving company. In towns that don’t care that much about their hockey team, that might have looked like a harmless joke, requesting a quote in the name of the Andersson family, but Beartown isn’t that sort of town. In the silence of the forest you don’t have to scream to be threatening.

Kira will figure it out soon enough, of course. She’s a smart woman, and she’s lived here long enough. Beartown is known for many things: dizzyingly beautiful forests, a last area of wilderness in a country where national politicians only want the big cities to grow. It has friendly, humble, hardworking people who love nature and sports, spectators who fill the stands no matter what league the team is playing in, pensioners who paint their faces green when they go to games. Responsible hunters, competent anglers, people as tough as the forest and as unyielding as the ice, neighbors who help anyone in need. Life can be hard, but they grin and say, “It’s supposed to be hard.” Beartown is known for that. But . . . well. The town is also known for other things.

A few years ago an old hockey referee talked to the media about his worst memories from his career. The second, third, and fourth places were occupied by games in the big cities where angry fans had thrown tubs of chewing tobacco, coins, and golf balls onto the ice when they didn’t like a decision. But in first place was a small rink way out in the forest, where the referee had once awarded a power play to the visiting team in the closing minute of a game. They had scored, Beartown had lost, and the referee had glanced up toward the infamous standing area in the arena reserved for “the Pack,” which was always full of men in black jackets singing at deafening volume or bellowing in a terrifying manner. But on that occasion they hadn’t raised their voices. The Pack had just stood there, completely silent.

Kira’s husband, Peter Andersson, general manager of Beartown Ice Hockey, was the first to realize the danger. He raced toward the scorekeeper’s box, and as the buzzer rang out to signal the end of the game, he managed to switch all the lights off. In the darkness the security guards led the referees out and drove them away. No one needed to explain what would have happened otherwise.

That's why softly spoken threats work here. A call to a moving company is enough, and Kira will understand the reason soon.

The meeting in the regional council building isn't yet finished, but a few people in Beartown already know the result.

There are always flags fluttering outside the council building: the national flag and one bearing the council's coat of arms. The local politicians can see them from the conference room. It's a few days before the Midsummer holiday, three weeks after Kevin and his family left town. They changed history when they did that: not the history that was yet to come, but the history that had already happened. But not everyone has realized that yet.

One of the councillors coughs nervously, makes a brave attempt to button his jacket, even though as a rough guess half a dozen Christmas buffets must have passed since that was even theoretically possible, and says, "I'm sorry, Peter, but we've decided that the region would be best served if we focus the council's resources on one hockey team. Not two. We want to focus on . . . Hed Hockey. It would be in everyone's best interests, yours included, if you could just accept that. Bearing in mind the . . . situation."

Peter Andersson is sitting on the other side of the table. The realization of how he has been betrayed sends him tumbling into the darkness, and his voice is barely audible when he manages to say, "But we—we just need a bit of help for a few months, until we find more sponsors. The council just has to stand as guarantor for the loan from the bank."

He falls silent, immediately embarrassed at his own stupidity. Obviously the councillors have already spoken to the bank managers—they're neighbors, they play golf and hunt elk together. This decision was made long before Peter walked into the room. When the councillors asked him to come, they were careful to stress that this would be an "informal meeting."

There won't be any minutes. The chairs in the meeting room are extra narrow, enabling the men with all the power to sit on more than one chair at the same time.

Peter's phone buzzes. When he opens it, he finds an email telling him that the director of Beartown Ice Hockey Club has resigned. He must have known what was going to happen here and has probably already been offered a job in Hed instead. Peter is going to be left to deal with the blow on his own.

The politicians on the other side of the table squirm uncomfortably. Peter can see what they're thinking: "Don't embarrass yourself. Don't plead, don't beg. Take it like a man."

Beartown lies beside a large lake, with a narrow strip of beach along the whole of one side. At this time of year the beach belongs to the town's teenagers, when it's so warm that you almost manage to forget that winter in Beartown is nine months long. Among the profusion of beach balls and hormones sits a twelve-year-old boy in sunglasses. His name is Leo Andersson. Not many people on the beach knew that last year, but they all know it now and keep glancing at him as if he were primed to explode. A couple of months ago, Leo's older sister, Maya, was raped by Kevin, but the police were unable to prove anything, so Kevin got off. The townspeople divided, most of them taking Kevin's side, and the hate escalated until they tried to drive Leo's family out of town. They threw stones with the word BITCH painted on them through his sister's window, they bullied her at school, they called a meeting at the rink and tried to get her and Leo's dad fired as general manager of Beartown Ice Hockey.

A witness came forward, a boy the same age as Maya who had been in the house when it had happened. But that didn't make any difference. The police did nothing, the town kept quiet, the adults did nothing to help Maya. Then one night, not long after that, something else happened. No one knows exactly what. But all of a sudden Kevin stopped going out. Rumors that he was mentally ill started to circulate; then, one morning three weeks ago, he and his family just up and left town.

Leo had thought everything would get better then. But it got worse instead. He's twelve years old, and this summer he learns that people will always choose a simple lie over a complicated truth, because the lie has one unbeatable advantage: the truth always has to stick to what actually happened, whereas the lie just has to be easy to believe.

When a vote of the club's members had decided by the smallest possible margin to let Peter Andersson stay on as general manager back at that meeting in the spring, Kevin's dad had immediately seen to it that Kevin changed clubs, from Beartown to Hed. He had persuaded the coach, almost all the sponsors, and almost all of the best players from the junior team to move with him. When Kevin's family suddenly left town three weeks ago, everything was turned upside down again, but—weirdly enough—nothing changed.

And what had Leo expected? That everyone would suddenly realize that Kevin was guilty and apologize? That the sponsors and players would come back to Beartown with their heads bowed? Like hell they did. No one bows their heads around here, for the simple reason that many of our worst deeds are the result of our never wanting to admit that we're wrong. The greater the mistake and the worse the consequences, the more pride we stand to lose if we back down. So no one does. Suddenly everyone with power and money in Beartown chose a different strategy: they stopped admitting that they had ever been friends of the Erdahl family. People started to mutter, very quietly at first, then with increasing assurance, that "that boy was always a bit odd," and "his dad put way too much pressure on him, anyone could see that." Then, weirdly, it slipped into comments like "that whole family, they were never . . . you know . . . like us. The father wasn't from around here, not originally, he was a newcomer."

The story when Kevin transferred to Hed Hockey Club was that he had been "the victim of a malicious accusation," and "the subject of a witch hunt," but now there's a different version: that the sponsors and players didn't move to Hed because they were following him but because they wanted to "distance themselves" from him. His name has been erased from Hed's membership register, but it's still on Beartown's. That way everyone was able to move far enough away from both perpetrator and victim, so now all Kevin's former friends can call him a "psychopath" while still calling Maya a "bitch." Lies are simple; truth is difficult.

Beartown Ice Hockey started to be called "Kevin's club" by so many people that Hed automatically began to feel like the opposite. Emails were sent from players' parents to local councillors about "responsibility" and "insecurity," and when people feel threatened a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs, one tiny incident at a time: one night someone wrote "Rapists!!!" on one of the road signs on the outskirts of Beartown. A couple of days later a group of eight-year-olds from both Beartown and Hed were sent home from summer

camp after a violent fight, caused by the kids from Hed chanting “Beartown Rapists!” at the kids from Beartown.

Leo is sitting on the beach today, and fifty feet away sit Kevin’s old friends, big, strong eighteen-year-olds. They’re wearing red Hed Hockey caps now. They’re the ones who wrote online that Maya had “deserved it” and that Kevin was obviously innocent because “who the hell would want to touch that slut even with a shitty stick?” As if Maya had ever asked any of them to touch her with anything at all. Now the same boys claim that Kevin was never one of them, and they’ll go on repeating the same lie until he’s associated only with Beartown, because however this story gets distorted these boys will make themselves the heroes. They always win.

Leo is six years younger than most of them; he’s an awful lot smaller and an awful lot weaker, but some of his friends have still started to tell him that he “ought to do something.” That one of those bastards “needs to be punished.” That he has to “be a man.” Masculinity is complicated when you’re twelve. And at every other age, too.



Then there’s a noise. Heads look down at towels. All over the beach cell phones start to vibrate. First one or two, then all at once, until the buzzing blurs together into a invisible orchestra where all the instruments are being tuned at the same time.

The news is arriving.



Beartown Ice Hockey no longer exists.



“It’s only a sports club, there are more important things.” It’s easy to say that sort of thing if you believe that sports is merely a matter of numbers. But it never is, and you can only understand that if you start with the simplest question: How does it feel for a child to play hockey? It’s not so hard to answer that. Have you ever been in love? That’s how it feels.



A sweaty sixteen-year-old is running along the road outside Beartown. His name is Amat. In a garage out in the woods, a dirty eighteen-year-old is helping his dad fetch tools and stack tires. His name is Bobo. In a garden a four-and-a-half-year-old girl is firing pucks from a patio into a brick wall. Her name is Alicia.

Amat hopes that one day he's going to be good enough for hockey to take him and his mother away from here. For him sports are a future. Bobo just hopes he can have another season of laughter and no responsibilities, seeing as he knows that every day after that will be like all his dad's days. For Bobo sports are a last chance for play.

For Alicia, the four-and-a-half-year-old girl firing pucks on a patio? Have you ever been in love? That's what sports are for her.



Cell phones buzz. The town stops. Nothing travels faster than a good story.



Amat, sixteen years old, stops out on the road. Hands on knees, chest heavy around his heart: *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Bobo, eighteen years old, rolls another car into the workshop and starts to beat out a dent in the plate: *bang-bang-bang*. Alicia, four and a half years old, stands on a patio in a garden. Her gloves are too big and the stick is too long, but she still fires a puck at the wall as hard as she can: *bang!*

They've grown up in a small town in a big forest. There are plenty of adults around here who say that work is getting harder to find and the winters are getting worse, that the trees are denser and the houses sparser, that all the natural resources may be out in the countryside but all the money still ends up in the big damn cities. "Because bears shit in the woods, and everyone else shits on Beartown." It's easy for children to love hockey, because you don't have time to think when you're playing it. Memory loss is one of the finest things sports can give us.

But now the text messages arrive. Amat stops, Bobo lets go of the hammer, and soon someone is going to have to try to explain to a four-and-a-half-year-old girl what it means when a hockey club "goes bankrupt." Try to make it sound like it's just a sports club