

# THE BLACK HOUR



# THE BLACK HOUR

A NOVEL

LORI RADER-DAY



**SEVENTH STREET BOOKS®**

AN IMPRINT OF PROMETHEUS BOOKS

59 JOHN GLENN DRIVE • AMHERST, NY 14228

[www.seventhstreetbooks.com](http://www.seventhstreetbooks.com)

Published 2014 by Seventh Street Books™, an imprint of Prometheus Books

*The Black Hour*. Copyright © 2014 by Lori Rader-Day. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and is not intended by the author.

Cover image by Matt Frankel  
Cover design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

Inquiries should be addressed to  
Seventh Street Books  
59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228  
VOICE: 716-691-0133  
FAX: 716-691-0137  
WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

18 17 16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rader-Day, Lori, 1973-

The black hour / by Lori Rader-Day.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61614-885-0 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-61614-886-7 (ebook)

1. Women college teachers—Fiction. 2. Teachers' assistants—Fiction.
3. College teachers—Crimes against—Fiction. 4. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3618.A3475B57 2014

813'6—dc23

2014003653

Printed in the United States of America

**For Greg**



# PART I



## CHAPTER 1

# AMELIA

**M**y lungs clawed for air as though I were drowning. I stopped, hunched over my grandmotherly cane, gasping. The curved walk up from the parking lot stretched out before me longer than I remembered, steeper. This is how it would be. Every task more difficult than before. Every step a public performance.

That's when I heard the camera.

I'd been expecting someone, hadn't I? One of the lawyers, a campus cop. I always expected to be watched now. Why else had I parked not in the handicapped spot in the faculty lot but the one just next to it?

The guy with the camera was too young to be a lawyer or the police. His hair punked, his chin smooth. The student press had provided my welcoming committee.

What did I look like to this kid? From a distance, ignoring the cane, without the zoom lens, maybe I could pass for a student. A grad student. My hair swung loose and long. I'd made an effort. After ten months on the couch, I'd pulled out the good shampoo, the high heels, *lipstick*.

The cane, though, wasn't fooling anyone.

"Did you get a shot up my skirt—" I couldn't chase down my breath. I readjusted my bag across my chest. "—when I was digging myself out of my car? Did you get that? Pulitzer stuff?"

He lowered the camera, paying close attention to his lens.

"You're not the one who claimed to be my nephew in the emergency room, are you?" My face felt hot. Through the zoom lens, clutching the swan's neck of my cane, I wouldn't look anything like a

student. Dark circles under my eyes. Shaking hands. Maybe the photographer couldn't see that I already regretted the heels. Maybe he wasn't really looking. "Or are you the one who prank calls me at two in the morning? Don't get me wrong," I said. "I'm up. The pain's good for that."

He looked now.

"Get my good side, OK?" I posed, both hands on the cane, chin lifted toward the lake. It sat like a blue jewel on the horizon. A beautiful day to rise from the dead.

The camera stayed silent.

"What? Are you waiting for me to drop my clothes so you can see the—"

I'd been looking forward to this day and had planned an early arrival to avoid a few stares. Hoping to get one minute with my old life before the new one caught up with me.

"Here's what I think," I said, continuing past his spot against the ivy and on to the front door of Dale Hall with what I hoped looked like dignity. "A restraining order isn't the best way to start your career."

I reached for the door. An electrical charge shot through my belly, my hip, down through my leg. A crushing bolt of lightning I couldn't predict and couldn't control. I was on fire. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the photographer raise his camera.

I launched myself through the pain and into the lobby.

The kid didn't follow. No one came running. I took my time, clutching the cane and fighting for the surface. At last I felt the ground steady under my feet. After a few shuddering breaths, I could smell the deep musk of Dale Hall: wood paneling, dusty books, and disinfectant that never quite reached the corners. It was a smell more than a hundred years in the making. Home. Only one place in the world felt more inviting than this spot, and that was the small, drafty room upstairs that served as my office.

I lurched toward the elevator, then stopped.

I had taken the elevator, able-bodied, many times. But the path to the elevator would trot me past the glass doors of the dean's suite, past

his gossiping assistant, and through an open atrium, where my clicking and clacking would only be magnified.

To my right, the staircase rolled out like a tongue, a taunt.

At the summit, just up there, lay the scene of the crime. Peering up into the darkness, I felt a cold finger of fear slide down my spine.

*The dark hall, a hand rising—*

No.

I'd begun to think of my memory as a high shelf at the back of a closet. I couldn't reach everything, no matter how hard I stretched. When the shelf of memory wobbled, I righted it by force.

There were twenty-five or so stairs, and then one more after the landing pivoted. That was all. A physical challenge, sure, but how hard had I fought, only to have a few stairs stop me? I could do this. I had to.

I positioned myself at the first step and took stock.

Up, lead with the good leg, the physical therapists had said. Down, lead with the bad. I didn't like thinking that half my body had turned on me, but who could blame it? I took a first gentle step with my right leg, no problem, then positioned the cane and pulled the left—bad—leg up behind, only to be met with a pinprick of outrage deep in my gut. I eyed the next step like a foe.

We'd make it a game, the cane and I. Right leg, weight shift, cane-tap up, left heel up, *ouch*, weight shift, right again, repeat. I lost track of the game and stopped to rest. I glanced over my shoulder. I'd climbed four steps.

Below, a young man stood watching.

A different kind of electricity shot through me. I noticed his heavy backpack, his empty hands. A student. I'd always liked the students. You had to, or none of it was worth it.

I didn't have to like them anymore.

I went back to my climb, suddenly understanding why the dean hadn't wanted me to return.

Jim Perry, his bushy white eyebrows like a pair of hamsters shading his eyes, had come to see me at home a week ago. An unexpected visit, me still in the sweatpants I'd worn for three days. I didn't look like I

had it together, but I promised him I did. The university would offer me retirement, he announced, as though I'd won an award. With a settlement and health benefits. I needed those. "Amelia, you should take more time to get over this," he said. He'd already called it *the accident*. "We want to see you healthy. We want to see you well."

In other words, they didn't want to see me at all. Retire? I'd only received tenure two years ago, only been handed my PhD a handful of years before that. An academic career was supposed to be long and steady. A marathon—though the metaphor stung—where you ran hard and long, and at the finish line your peers gathered around you with precariously full wineglasses and seethed with jealousy. No more teaching. No grading. No advising earnest graduate students. No more obligations beyond your own research interests. The ultimate tenure.

But you had to earn it. You had to run the marathon, or you were just unemployed.

I took a deep breath and leaned into the next step. I could not believe how many stairs there were to the second floor. I had enough time to think about architectural trends, the ascent of the modern style. Short ceilings, manageable flights of stairs—what was wrong with squat, one-story buildings? Nothing. I loved this building, loved the wide stairs worn with footsteps, the smooth wooden rail I clutched to pull myself up. Even at first sight, Dale Hall had seemed to me a venerable finish line. Not bad for a girl from the sticks, for the hardship case who'd gone to a state university and only by the grace of full funding. Not bad, and highly unlikely. That first year at Robert University, I'd hardly relaxed, certain that someone would pull out the rug. But I'd earned my post and then tenure to keep it. I'd be damned if they were going to take it from me.

Though just now I'd have given it all away to work in one of those sprawling suburban junior college malls instead of this relic.

A hesitant footstep sounded behind me. I clung to the railing, leaving plenty of room to get by. Whoever it was hung back.

"OK," I huffed and waved them ahead with the cane.

"Good morning, Dr. Emmet." The kid from below caught up with

me, his hair flopping into his eyes. Of course. They'd all know me now. "Do you need—"

"OK," I said.

His quick shoes hurried ahead and around the corner.

What did I need? I needed to take the elevator.

Right foot up, cane-tap, left—*oh, jumping Christ that hurt.*

What would happen if I couldn't make it up the stairs, if I could not force my body to finish what I'd started? I was more than halfway now, but sweating and deaf to everything but my own ragged breath. All the worries came rushing up to greet me. I might never walk without the cane. I might never live without that bolt of lightning through my gut. I would never carry children. I had trouble imagining in which universe I would ever again hope to have sex. Doyle's face came to me, but that didn't help. I was alone, damaged. Old fears I thought I'd pushed away roared back. Never good enough. Now that everyone was looking, I couldn't hide it.

Step by excruciating step, I rose toward the landing, glaring at the last riser. Cane-tap, and now there was a pause, a brace against what was coming, *goddamn heel up*—and the searing pain in my hip and through my pelvis, so much pain that I wanted, just for a while, to lie down and give up.

My boss wanted it. Maybe they all did.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I'd said the morning Jim came to talk me out of my life.

Like everyone else I'd heard from while I was in the hospital or on leave, like the insurance detectives and the kid's family's lawyer who wasn't supposed to contact me but tried, like all of the reporters and the bottom-feeding curious who had no real excuse to want to know what happened. Like the voice on the other end of the line most mornings at two. Like everyone else, the dean thought I must have done *something*.

Something unspeakable. Something so bad no one could think what it could be.

"What could have caused that kid to . . . did you even know him?" Corrine had asked. When they finally let someone visit me in intensive

care, Corrine was the only person I wanted. Even she, my officemate and best friend, couldn't make sense of it. "What *happened?*" she kept saying.

Highly medicated, I'd hardly managed Corrine's name. I could barely speak, barely think. I couldn't tell her.

I couldn't tell anyone why that kid had shot me.

I didn't know.

The landing. Cane-tap, pause. The last step might buckle me, but I had come this far. I had come to—drumroll—the second floor.

It didn't seem like much, but the roar of my bones and belly assured me it was something. Even weak and gnarled, I could climb a few stairs. I could get to my office. I could work.

Of course I'd never be able to get back down. I'd have to wait until everyone else had left so I could take the elevator. Tomorrow, the next day, the rest of the academic year? I couldn't begin to think about the life ahead of me.

At the very least, though, I had a life to dread.

I turned to face the hallway, and there, leaning against the wall outside my office, his back to the stairs, was a man. My brain supplied the image—a *hand and gun rising out of the dark*—

It couldn't be.

What about the second explosion? And the open hand, like a flower, on the carpet? The hand that was not mine. Memories rushed at me but didn't link up.

My heaving breath roared in the silent hall. I collapsed against the handrail, waiting. If someone had come to finish what the student before had started, I couldn't stop it. I was too weak to do this, all this, again.

The man turned. It was the kid from the stairs.

What was in his backpack? What was that look on his face? Shame, stealth, a resemblance.

The moment passed. His features rearranged into uncertainty.

"What?" I panted.

"I was hoping to, uh, catch you."

“Not moving that fast. What do you want?”

He glanced away. “I think you’re my advisor.”

“Your advisor?” I tried my weight on the cane. This last step was Kilimanjaro. It was Everest. Who’s to say I wouldn’t fall? Someone somewhere had already placed that bet.

“Your *advisor*.” I mopped my forehead with the back of my hand. “If I were you, I’d have mixed feelings about that.”