

Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010
macteenbooks.com

Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.
Copyright © 2014 by April Henry
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Henry, April.

The body in the woods / April Henry. — First edition.
pages cm. — (Point last seen ; 1)

Summary: While helping the Portland County Sheriff's Search and Rescue to seek a missing autistic man, teens Alexis, Nick, and Ruby find, instead, a body and join forces to find the girl's murderer, forming an unlikely friendship, as well.

ISBN 978-0-8050-9852-5 (hardback)

ISBN 978-0-8050-9866-2 (e-book)

[1. Murder—Fiction. 2. Criminal investigation—Fiction. 3. Friendship—Fiction.
4. Eccentrics and eccentricities—Fiction. 5. Mystery and detective stories.]

I. Title.

PZ7.H39356Bod 2014 [Fic]—dc23 2013046396

Henry Holt books may be purchased for business or promotional use.

For information on bulk purchases, please contact Macmillan
Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 x5442
or by e-mail at specialmarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition—2014
Designed by April Ward
Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

CHAPTER 1

TUESDAY

BLOOD



FOR ALEXIS FROST, NICK WALKER, AND RUBY McClure, it all started with a phone call and two texts. It ended with fear and courage, love and loathing, screaming and blood. Lots of blood.

When the classroom phone rang in American history, Alexis Frost straightened up and blinked, trying to will herself awake as the teacher answered it. She managed to yawn without opening her mouth, the cords stretching tight in her neck. Last night had been another hard one.

“Alexis?” Mrs. Fairchild turned toward her.

“Yes?” Her heart sped up. What was it this time? The possibilities were endless. None of them good.

“Could you come up here, please?”

Mrs. Fairchild was looking at Alexis as if she was seeing her in a new light. Had it finally happened, then, the thing she both feared and longed for? Had something happened to her mother?

Nick Walker's thumbs were poised over the virtual keyboard of the phone he held on his lap. He was pretending to listen to Mr. Dill, his English teacher, while he was really texting Sasha Madigan, trying this angle and that to persuade her to study with him tonight. Which he hoped would mean lots of copying (on his part) and lots of kissing (on both their parts).

The phone vibrated in his hand. Mr. Dill was busy writing on the board, so Nick lifted it a little closer to his face. It wasn't a reply from Sasha but a message from his Portland Search and Rescue team leader.

Search in Forest Park. Missing man. Meet time 1500.

His first SAR call-out! He jumped to his feet.

"Nick?" Mr. Dill turned and looked at him over the top of his glasses. "What is it?" Mr. Dill had a lot of rules. He had already complained about Nick's habit of drawing—only Mr. Dill called it doodling—in class.

Nick held up his phone while pointing at it with his other hand as if he had been hired to demonstrate it. "I'm with Portland Search and Rescue, and we've been mobilized to find a man missing in Forest Park. I have to leave now."

"Um, okay," Mr. Dill said uncertainly. Someone in Wilson High's administration had had to sign off on Nick being allowed to join searches during the school day, but maybe the information hadn't filtered down to his teachers.

No matter. Nick was already out the door.

He just hoped someone from class would tell Sasha.
A text wouldn't do it justice.

Nick Walker, called out on a lifesaving mission.

Ruby McClure felt her phone buzz in her jeans pocket.
She waited until the end of chemistry to check it.

Fifteen hundred made so much more sense than three P.M. Ruby preferred military time. No questions about whether "nine" meant morning or night. No having to rely on context. No one getting hung up on whether 1200 had an A.M. or a P.M. after it, which was a ridiculous idea because A.M. meant "ante meridiem" and P.M. meant "post meridiem" and *meridiem* was Latin for "midday," and twelve noon was midday itself.

It was 1357 now. Which meant she had an hour to get home, change into hiking clothes, pick up her SAR backpack, and meet the rest of the team at the Portland sheriff's office.

Piece of cake.

Ruby pulled out the keys to her car as she walked to the office to sign herself out. On the way, her phone buzzed again. It was Nick, asking for a ride.



CHAPTER 2

TUESDAY

A BUNCH OF TEENAGERS

THE PORTLAND COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE had called out all teams to search for the missing man. Of the twenty teens on Team Alpha, twelve had responded. Now they climbed out of the fifteen-passenger van driven by Jon Partridge, one of the adult advisers, and into a parking lot next to Forest Park. Team Bravo, along with the sheriff's deputy assigned to this search, were in a second van and would take the other end of the huge park. With the exception of the deputy, everyone was a volunteer.

The last one out of the van, Alexis was surreptitiously trying to eat a granola bar from her backpack's emergency rations. Today was looking like it might qualify as an emergency. Not because of this search, but because of how the apartment had looked when she stopped to grab her gear. By the time Alexis had gotten off the city bus at the sheriff's office, the van had been idling outside. She had been the last to board.

Mitchell Wiggins clapped his hands. "Listen up, people!" Mitchell was an Eagle Scout who wanted to be a cop. Even though he had been elected team leader only a

few days ago, it was clearly a natural fit. He seemed born to wear some kind of uniform. His yellow SAR climbing helmet—the yellow marked him as the leader, while the rest of the team wore red helmets—was already buckled into place. Now his pale, earnest face regarded each of them in turn. “Today we will be conducting a hasty search for a thirty-four-year-old white man named Bobby Balog.”

This was it, then. The real deal. Alexis took a deep breath. Most of the other teens here were certified. They had completed the nine months of training and had been called out on dozens of searches. All Alexis and a few of the others had behind them were seven Wednesday-evening classes and two weekend training exercises. From class, she knew that a hasty search was just like it sounded, a quick search that stuck to the most obvious trails and routes. It was also quite possible that this would turn out to be what was known in SAR circles as “a bastard search,” when you went looking for someone who was never really lost in the first place.

“Bobby is five foot eight and two hundred pounds,” Mitchell continued. “He’s wearing dark blue Nike shoes. The sole pattern is made up of squares about the size of keyboard keys.” A few of the more experienced kids, who had training in tracking, nodded. “He’s also wearing jeans, a gray sweater, and a navy blue windbreaker.”

Alexis exchanged a look with Nick. She knew they were thinking the same thing. Not a single bright color. This wasn’t going to be easy.

“And he’s autistic,” Mitchell added, putting the icing on the cake. “The PLS”—point last seen—“is his bedroom,

which is a mile from here, but he loves Forest Park and has run away and hidden here before.”

“How autistic?” Ruby asked. “That diagnosis covers a wide range of behaviors.” She was standing right next to Alexis. Too close. As usual.

Alexis slid a half step sideways. She didn’t want anyone thinking they were really friends. Most especially Ruby.

Mitchell was opening his mouth to answer when a silver Lexus sped into the lot. Before it was even at a complete stop, heels were clip-clopping toward them. Their owner was a woman with short, curly dark hair who wore a tailored long black wool coat. Smeared mascara rimmed her red, swollen eyes. Following more slowly in her wake was a silver-haired man dressed in dark slacks, a white shirt, and a black sweater vest. He was coatless, even though the temperature was only in the mid-forties.

“Wait a minute.” The woman stopped short when she saw their faces. “*You’re* Portland Search and Rescue?”

Mitchell pulled his skinny frame to its full six-foot-two height. “Yes, ma’am, we are.”

“A bunch of teenagers?”

“Marla.” The man laid his hand on her arm, but she shook it off.

Jon cleared his throat and stepped forward. He might be twenty-six, but Jon had been in SAR since he was fifteen. “Every person you see has volunteered to be here. Most of us have received hundreds of hours of training and conducted dozens of rescues. That’s why the Portland County Sheriff’s Office chooses us to search for people who are lost or injured.” His steel-gray eyes never left the woman’s face. “Now, we could keep talking about their

experience level, or we could start searching for your son while there's still light."

Mrs. Balog blinked and closed her mouth.

Only Ruby was unfazed by this exchange. "Exactly how autistic is Bobby?"

It was Mr. Balog who answered. "He doesn't have any physical handicaps or other medical conditions. He's a fast walker and not much of a talker. He'll probably hide from you."

"He loves the woods," Mrs. Balog said. "And he doesn't like strangers." She ran a knuckle under one eye. "He's done this twice since we moved to Portland, but the other times it was summer."

Alexis wished they still had summer's long days and warm temperatures. Instead it was November and they were working against time, against the sun that was already sinking, against the night that would drop temperatures even further, against the creeks and fallen snags and rabbit holes that Bobby might blunder into.

Regaining his professional balance, Mitchell turned his focus back to the team. "Remember, guys, your job is not just to search but to inform the public. Let them be your eyes and ears. If they have anything to report, they can do it at the command post we'll set up here."

"I have a photo of Bobby," Mr. Balog offered, pulling a cell phone from his back pocket. His face was creased and worn. Alexis wondered how many of the lines were the result of having a kid who wasn't normal. But you couldn't change your family.

Mitchell took the phone and looked at it for a long moment before passing it on. As it went from hand to

hand, Alexis was reminded of the few times her mom had taken her to church, the Communion tray passing in silence. Mrs. Balog shivered as the wind began to pick up, and her husband put his arm around her.

When it was her turn, Alexis cradled the image of Bobby's round face. His smile was strangely wide and flat, as if someone had instructed him to show all his teeth, top and bottom. She silently promised him that she would find him if she could.

Jon's phone rang, and he walked to the other side of the van to answer it. For a second, Alexis strained to hear, wondering if they had found Bobby, but it sounded like he was arguing with his girlfriend. While Jon was busy, Mitchell split them into teams of two or three, assigning the more experienced searchers the higher probability areas. Each team was given a rat pack—a small pack that buckled across the chest and contained a GPS and a radio.

Finally only Alexis, Ruby, and Nick were left to be dispatched. Obviously Alexis should have taken another step away from Ruby while she still had a chance.

Jon came back around the corner of the van. "Where's the rest of the team?"

"Already out on the trail," Mitchell answered.

Jon dropped his voice so the Balogs couldn't overhear. "What were you thinking? These three are brand-new! You should have split them up."

They all looked down the trail, but the others were already out of sight.

Mitchell's face reddened. "Sorry!"

Jon sighed, rubbing a spot just above his left eyebrow. "It is what it is." The Balogs were leaning in, trying to listen,

so he lowered his voice slightly. "I don't want you three out of sight of the trail or each other. Nick, you'll be in charge of the rat pack. Ruby, I want you to take the topo map."

Leaving nothing for Alexis. She had tried her best to fit in, but maybe Jon could see right through her.

SAR was her ticket to college. She wasn't going to be like the other girls in her neighborhood, getting pregnant or dropping out or settling for a minimum-wage job. But even a state school would be expensive, and her guidance counselor had told Alexis that her B average was not enough to win her any scholarships. To make herself stand out, the counselor had said, she needed to add an eye-catching extracurricular. But Alexis was too uncoordinated for sports, she couldn't read music, and yearbook had been too competitive.

It had been either this or the Mathletes.

Mitchell handed the topo map to Ruby, and the four of them leaned in close. His long finger traced the way they were supposed to go. "Follow this section of the trail."

"But that's nowhere near where you said he was found the last two times," Nick protested.

Mitchell's jaw clenched. "We need to cover ground, and figuring out where he isn't is almost as important as figuring out where he is. So you guys had better get going."

Suddenly Mrs. Balog grabbed the arm of the blue Gore-Tex jacket Alexis had scored a few weeks ago at Goodwill. "Do you think you'll find him?" Her breath was hot and stale. Alexis couldn't look away from her brown eyes, the whites threaded with red.

What should she say?

"We're going to try."