

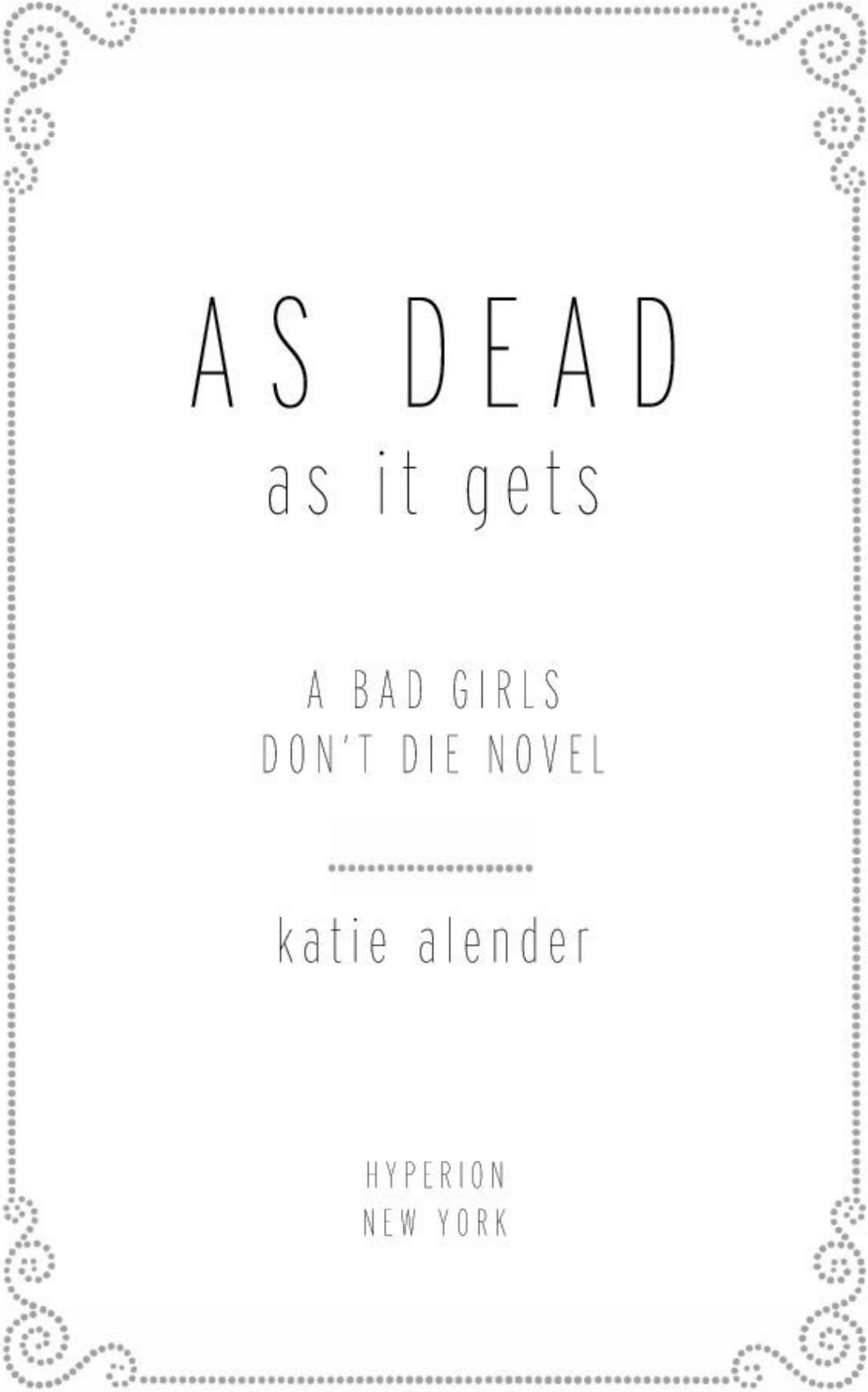
A BAD GIRLS DON'T DIE NOVEL

# AS DEAD

as it gets



katie alender



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DON'T DIE NOVEL

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HYPERION  
NEW YORK

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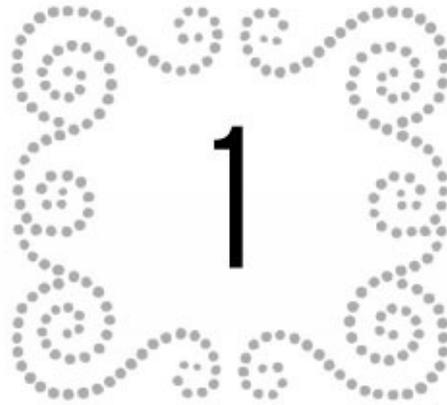
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THE BAD NEWS IS, ghosts are everywhere.

They're in your kitchen, your garage, your school cafeteria. They sit dumbly through your pool parties and your fights with parents and make-out sessions with your boyfriend. They hover in the background while you watch scary movies with your friends. You scream when the bad guy in the mask jumps out, but all the while, two feet away from you, a horrible spirit is breathing ectoplasm down your neck.

The good news—for you—is that you'll never know it.

Even if you're careless enough to tempt them with your stupid games, spinning around in a dark bathroom, chanting the name of a ghost who would just love to show up and rip your head off your body—and I mean literally pop that nice, round cantaloupe head right off your skinny neck—you'll probably never, in your entire life, so much as see a ghost.

But I do.

I see them all the time.

The first one I ever saw was at a funeral—appropriate, right? Funerals aren't exactly awesome to begin with. But they get way less fun when the ghost of the dead girl decides to show up and try to knock you into her open grave. This makes everyone at the funeral think you're crazy, on top of the fact that they all secretly suspect you're the one who killed her in the first place.

You spend a day or two wondering if you really saw what you think you saw, and you suspect that the people who think you're crazy might actually be on to something. Then you start noticing things—*weird* things that seem to appear and disappear in your peripheral vision—odd, smudgy shapes. Gradually, you realize the weird things are only in photos and on TV, and one day you wake up and realize the shapes and smudges have form, and they're not just shapes and smudges—

They're dead people.

At this point, you pretty much know you're crazy.

That's how it happened for me, anyway.

For instance, in a snapshot that used to hang over my desk, among the “say cheese” grinning

faces is also an old dead woman with oozing sores on her face. Living in the local TV news studio is a man with a railway spike through his chest. And in most of the photographed step-by-step lab instructions in my science book, there's a pair of petite twin girls with sunken cheeks and hollow-looking eyes, who always have their arms wrapped around each other's waists. The ghosts in the images are just like regular people—perfectly still, unmoving, caught in a fraction of a moment of their undead lives.

Have you ever tried to go a day without looking at a photograph or seeing a television? My whole existence has become one extraordinarily un-fun game of spot-the-spirits. But school portraits, the latest issue of *Cosmo*, the evening news—those don't mean a thing. Because at the end of the day, the pictures I *really* care about are the ones I take with my own camera.

Since I was twelve years old, photography has been like a part of me—the best part. When everything else in my life was going wrong, I could retreat into my own little universe and see the world as I wanted to see it.

And now I don't even want to go near my camera. I don't want to look at my photos.

Because they're full of dead people.

So here I am. Life spectacularly in ruins, but nowhere to run. No place to hide. From the stares, the whispers, the suspicion...the ghosts...and worst of all...

From my own thoughts.



JARED MOVED LIKE A HUNTER, light on his feet—branches and leaves barely crackled beneath him. And he was always looking, listening, waiting for the right moment to soundlessly lift his camera and shoot.

Watching him work was like a tiny window into my old life.

“So I said, yes, I’d be glad to respect a substitute teacher, providing she had at least a *partial* understanding of the scientific method. And then—” His gaze traveled up over my head. He raised his camera and flashed off a quick sequence of photos as a shadow swept over the trail.

A moment later, he turned the camera to show me the viewfinder. “An owl. What’s it doing out during the day? Something must have disturbed its nest.”

My basic rule is: I don’t look at pictures if I don’t have to. But I figured it was a safe enough bet that there weren’t any ghosts hovering above us in midair, so I took the bait and scrolled through Jared’s images. They were perfect: the owl’s belly was striped in vivid black-and-white lines, and its wings were outstretched, the feathers at their edges spread like fingers.

“I love these,” I said.

I realized I was still holding on to the camera, and therefore still holding on to Jared, who had the strap looped around his neck. He didn’t seem to mind being so close, but I gently handed him the camera and took a step back.

He gave me a quick smile. I turned away.

It was a blindingly bleak day. The sky was thick with clouds, and the weekend’s cold snap had scared off the nature preserve’s usual contingent of casual hikers. We’d been following the trail for an hour and passed only two joggers. It was the second day of winter, and the high that day hovered under forty degrees. I was bundled up three layers deep, but Jared just wore a thin jacket over his usual hipster-chic uniform: jeans and a flannel shirt with polished brown shoes.

“Did you get in trouble?” I asked.

He blinked, not remembering what we’d been talking about. “Oh...I got sent to the headmaster’s office.”

“That sucks.”

---

“Nah.” He shrugged. “Father Lopez gets it. He just told me to be nice.”

I was only half listening. I was still thinking about the owl—the way its wings cut into the gray winter sky. The way you could see its knobby feet tucked up against its body. Cold, miserable envy consumed me.

You might wonder why a person who’s afraid to even look at a photograph would go out specifically to take them. But my afternoons with Jared weren’t really about pictures. They were about hanging out with someone who knew me—but not *too* well. Who was interested in me—but not *too* interested. He was kind of the only person I could bear to be around. Besides, he was the only non-blood relative who ever asked me to do anything.

Even if I didn’t want to take photos, I still needed the air and the distance from my suffocating home and my suffocating (though well-meaning) family. I always brought my camera, because I was afraid that if I didn’t, Jared would think I was weird and stop inviting me to go with him. So it was basically a prop. My entrance fee. I rarely took pictures, but I got pretty good at faking it—taking just enough to avoid suspicion.

But thinking about the swooping arc of the owl’s flight made me reckless. I raised the camera to my eye, and Jared fell silent and wandered away, as if he knew this was something I needed to do by myself.

First, I aimed my lens at the sky, toward the spindly, bald branches of the trees. I liked how they seemed to grow from the bottom of the frame like blades of grass.

I lowered the shot slightly and took another exposure. Then I let it fall a little lower and took another. I kept checking for the first hint of a ghost, but there was nothing. Relief washed over me, and I fell into a rhythm as natural to me as breathing—*click*, move, *click*, move. Jared was a few feet away, and we were like two dancers onstage—always aware of each other, but focused on our own work first.

Gradually, I forgot to worry about ghosts.

Then, as we rounded a bend in the trail, I scrolled back through the frames and glanced down at the display screen.

There was a person in my photos.

It took my brain a moment to catch up and process the sight of him: a little boy in a faded winter jacket, dark blond hair combed neatly across his forehead. He couldn’t have been more than three or four years old. The knees of his light brown pants were muddy, like he’d fallen. He was looking off the path into the distance.

In the next picture, he stared at the lens through angelically big blue eyes, like a young Carter Blume—who was kind of the last person on the planet I needed to be thinking about at that moment.

In the third photo, he was gone.

“Um...” I said, suddenly feeling totally off balance, like one of my legs had shrunk six inches. I glanced at Jared to see if he’d noticed anything, but he was honing in on the gnarled trunk of an old tree.

I looked around again—and heard the sound of rustling leaves in the distance.

I can’t *hear* the ghosts I see in pictures. I can only see them. So if I’d heard the boy walking—could he have been real? He certainly looked like a real boy. No oozing anything or deathly gray skin. Nothing seemed to be wrong with him—except that he was out in the wilderness all by himself.

“What’s up?” Jared asked.

“I—I think I might have seen someone,” I said. “A little kid.”

Jared’s eyebrows went up. “Out here? Alone?”

“Maybe.” I gazed doubtfully down the path. “Do you think we should look for him?”

“Of course,” he said, capping his lens and letting the camera hang around his neck. “Let’s go.”

I tried not to notice the sensation of his hand pressing gently on my lower back as we walked.

Jared and I had met when we were finalists in a photography competition back in September.

Even after a few months of hanging out two or three times a week, we’d never come close to having any kind of romantic episode. The couple of times he’d dropped a hint, I’d replied with a carefully clueless response. And things never went further than that.

Which, honestly, was just the way I liked it. A rebound relationship was out of the question. Just the thought of being close to anyone but Carter made my whole body go numb.

We rounded a corner. Still no sign of the boy. My heart sank at the prospect of yet another crushing paranormal smackdown. If I’d been alone, I would have stopped.

But Jared was hurrying now, urging me along. “It’s too cold for a little kid to be outside.”

We walked so fast that I began to get hot under all of my layers, and my worn old thrift-store satchel-slash-purse banged against my side painfully. Jared kept searching the distance, as if the boy would pop into view at any moment. His unquestioning belief half convinced me that it had been a real live child I’d seen, not some ghostly apparition.

Call me foolish, but I felt like if I wanted it bad enough, he really would appear on the trail ahead of us.

Only he never did.

“Wait.” I slowed down. “I think maybe I didn’t see what I thought I saw.”

Jared turned to me, his face flushed pink from exertion. “What does that mean? You *imagined* seeing a little kid?”

I shrugged. “Maybe it was a shadow.”

“But I’m sure I heard something ahead. Didn’t you?” He stood still. “Listen—there it is again.”

And sure enough, I heard snapping twigs.

A surge of hope traveled through my chest. “Okay,” I said.

But as we went around the next curve, we stopped.

Ahead on the path was an opossum. It saw us and scurried noisily away into the brush.

“Oh,” Jared said.

Before he could say more, I lifted my camera and took two pictures. As I looked down at the readout, all the muscles in my body tensed.

There he was. Five feet away, staring up at us.

The little boy.

So he *was* a ghost.

*Of course he was.*

I veered to the outside edge of the path, well clear of the ghost, then swung around and clicked off a few more exposures. As I looked at them, the breath caught in my throat.

The back of the boy’s head was caved in.

*What did you expect?*

“Alexis? Are you all right?” Jared stood on the other side of the boy. Then he walked straight forward, right through him.

I stiffened.

Jared pulled his jacket around himself tightly. “I just got cold. Did you feel that breeze?”

That’s what happens when you pass through a ghost. I nodded and hugged myself, even though I was still sweaty after rushing up the trail.

“The sun’s going down, I guess,” he said.

I didn’t want to stick around and talk about the weather. The only thing worse than seeing dead people in photos is *them* seeing *me* and getting in my face. I grabbed Jared’s arm and pulled him along with me, away from the little boy.

After a hundred yards or so, I stopped and stuck my shaking hands into my pockets. “I was wrong,” I whispered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you when you were working.”

“There’s no need to apologize.” Jared’s voice was soft and urgent. “Alexis...I’m worried about you.”

I was embarrassed and miserable and still freaked out by the sight of the boy’s caved-in head. “I don’t know—I’m sorry—”

Jared stood right in front of me, his brown eyes as gentle as a deer’s, and put his hands on my shoulders. “It’s okay. Calm down. It’s okay.”

Without meaning to, I burst into tears.

*Ugh.*

I never would have done this before, not in a million years—cried like a maniac in a public place especially in front of someone else. It was as though, along with losing control over my pictures, I’d lost control over myself.

Jared pulled me close, let me rest my head against his shoulder, and stroked my hair with his cold, gloveless hands.

“Cry if you need to,” he said. “It’s all right.”

A second later, I swallowed hard and backed away.

Jared’s fingers remained lightly on my upper back. “Were you thinking about Lydia?”

He knew I’d been there when a girl from my school had died. And he knew that my whole life had changed because of that day. He assumed, as did the rest of the world—including my parents, sister, and guidance counselors—that all of my issues stemmed from the trauma of witnessing Lydia’s death.

And, yeah, okay, I’m sure a lot of them did. But it went so much deeper than that.

You know that saying *Pride comes before a fall*? Well, for me, it wasn’t just pride. It was... happiness. Security. Comfort. Contentment. I’d been so positive I knew what I was doing. How can you be that confident and still be wrong? And then, once you’ve realized how horribly wrong you were...how can you ever be confident again?

The fact is, you can’t. You just spend your whole life waiting for the next piano to fall out of the sky and smash you.

“You lost someone.” There was a gruff intimacy in Jared’s voice. He brushed the hair away from my eyes. “And that hurts. A lot. But it’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

I sniffled and nodded, then looked up into his endlessly deep eyes. It was as if there were ten layers of Jared behind the one he showed the world. When he gazed at me like this, it was like a few of the layers had been peeled back, revealing some hidden, tender thing.

He seemed to be holding his breath. He tucked my hair behind my ear...and then his fingers continued along my jawline, lightly lifting my chin.

There was a sudden heaviness in the air between us—that moment where things get fuzzy and the universe takes over.

Then we were kissing.

It was unlike any kiss I'd ever experienced. When Carter and I were a couple, it was all about the happy. Kissing was an extension of that, a celebration. A little party between us, amplifying our naive joy, our faith that the world was delighted to give us just what we wanted.

Between Jared and me, I felt a different kind of amplification, an ache inside my chest. It was like a fight for survival—two people coming together because they need to be touching to keep from fading out of existence. It was as if we were trading sad secrets....

And I *totally* didn't want it to stop.

Then I realized what I was doing and jerked out of the kiss, holding my hands up like a robbery victim.

"My God." Jared jumped back and stared at me, horrified. "Alexis, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—I mean, you were sad, and I—I shouldn't have...."

I took a dizzy step away, unable to tear my eyes away from his. Should I tell him not to blame himself? Could I do that without somehow implying that the kiss was a good thing?

All right, yeah, it was *good*—but that didn't make it a good *thing*.

"I should go," I managed to say. "We've been gone for a long time. My parents will worry."

He was watching me, still in shock. Then he collected himself. "Of course," he said, straightening his already-straight jacket. And just like that, the moment was gone.

To my utter surprise, I felt a pang of regret.

I mean, it wasn't like I hadn't kissed back.

The gray afternoon sky was sliding headlong into a purple twilight. The low sun shone through a tangle of bare branches in a spot of brilliant white. For the first time all day, Jared looked cold. And tired.

And lonesome.

"Come on," I said, reaching out to untwist his camera strap. "You're going to freeze to death out here."

His mouth quirked up in an almost-smile. His dark brown hair—as long as the Sacred Heart Academy dress code would let him wear it—hung down over his forehead. His cheekbones were chiseled, as if he'd been sculpted from marble. He looked like an aristocrat. And his lips had a slight natural downturn, which made his smiles feel like something you had to earn.

"You're right," he said. "It's getting late."

We walked in silence, eventually reaching the thick wood stumps that marked the edge of the parking lot, which held only three cars—his Jeep, my mom's gray sedan (which I'd borrowed), and a little blue hatchback.

Near the blue car, in the dim light, I saw a small scuffle, and then a girl cried out, "No, Spike,

come back! Sit! Stay!”

A little black dog came tearing across the parking lot toward us, dragging its leash behind it.

“Please stop him!” the girl called.

In one motion, Jared whipped the camera off his neck and handed it to me. Then he took off after the dog.

The girl came up to me, huffing and puffing. I recognized her right away—it was Kendra Charnow, a girl I knew from school. As soon as she saw me, she came to an awkward stop. “Alexis!?” she said. “Um—which way did they go?”

I pointed back down the path, and we both started running. But just around the bend, we found Jared, leading the dog by its leash.

“Thank you!” Kendra scooped the dog off the ground and kissed its tiny snout. “He’s a rescue, and they told us he was a runner, but I didn’t know...”

Then she got a good look at Jared.

Not being his girlfriend, I could watch her behavior objectively, like a scientist taking notes in the field. And it was always the same when girls noticed him.

Kendra’s shoulders went back, her stomach magically sucked itself in, and she fluffed the red ponytail sticking out from underneath her beige baseball cap. Then she tilted her head in that *See how cute I am?* way.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” she said to Jared. “I’m—”

“Glad to help with your dog,” Jared said. “I’m really sorry, we’d better get going. It must be close to freezing by now.”

Maybe it was the pull of my old Sunshine Club etiquette instincts, but I felt obligated to introduce them. “Jared, this is Kendra. She goes to Surrey.”

Kendra gave him a smooth smile. “I’m a friend of Alexis’s sister.”

Right. Not a friend of mine.

“Nice to meet you, Kendra,” Jared said, putting his hand on my elbow almost protectively. “Have a good night.”

“Good night,” she said.

And that was that. Jared walked me to the door of my mother’s car and waited while I seat-belted my camera into the passenger seat.

I looked up at him, struck slightly dumb by the way the pale gold light of the sunset lit up one side of his face like a Renaissance painting, touching off the edges of his hair with a thin halo of fire. And then, on the shadow side, his skin was as cool blue and smooth as ice.

He looked like a half-man, half-god.

And he wouldn’t even blink at another girl.

What was *wrong* with me?

“Take a picture,” he said, a smile spreading slowly across his lips. “It’ll last longer.”

I smiled back. That had been one of the first things I’d ever said to him.

If I were a girl who knew what she wanted—a girl who knew the difference between what she could have and what she couldn’t have—a girl who was able to let go of the past and move on—I would get out of the car, grab Jared, and smother him with kisses.

But I'm not that girl.

---

"Night," I said. *You will make someone so insanely happy*, I thought.

He smiled. "Night. Call me when you have some time."

"I will," I said.

And I would. Next time I was lonely, or feeling sorry for myself, or just needed to look at a face besides my mother's, father's, or sister's, I would call him—and he would come.

As I texted Mom to tell her I was on my way home, I kept an eye on Jared climbing into his Jeep. SEE YOU SOON <3 U, Mom replied.

I dropped my phone into the cup holder and switched on the radio, watching Jared turn left on to the quiet highway and disappear down the narrow strip of road.

*Something is seriously the matter with you, Alexis.*

I'm not a complete idiot. I know I'm not special enough to play hard-to-get and hold the attention of someone like him for any amount of time under normal circumstances. Jared had his own baggage. It wasn't just me who needed him—he needed me, too.

He'd never said what it was that haunted him, but I suspected it might have had something to do with the fact that he and his father lived alone. He'd never so much as mentioned his mother—and of course I didn't ask for an explanation. The whole basis of our friendship was that we didn't press the subject—*any* subject.

We were like a pair of travelers who wandered together because it was an infinitesimal bit easier than wandering alone.

Pearl-size drops of rain began to splash against the windshield, so I flicked on the wipers and made sure the headlights were shining. The road was empty in both directions, but I used my right-turn signal anyway, just in case Mom had spies out in the middle of nowhere.

The public-radio announcer droned on in a comfortingly bland voice about last-minute gift buying.

I put my foot on the gas, and just as I started to apply pressure—

The radio cut out.

There was a split second of silence; then a roar of static filled the car. It was so loud it seemed to be coming from inside my head, vibrating through my body like a scream. I took my hand off the wheel to smack the power button. But the sound didn't go away.

My ears hurt all the way down to the corners of my jaw.

While I was focused on the radio, the car lurched violently to the left and went into a spin.

I tried to remember what I'd been told about spinning out of control—don't slam the brake, right? Steer in the direction you want to go?

But what if the direction I wanted to go was *behind* me?

A bright white light flooded the car, like the headlights of a semi bearing down from fifteen feet away.

I braced for impact. The seconds seemed to stretch endlessly....

But the impact never came.

When one too many beats had passed, I glanced to my right and saw, as fast as a subliminal message flashing on a screen, a figure sitting in the front seat next to me: a girl—though it was too bright for me to see anything but her outline. As soon as I started to comprehend what I was seeing,

she blinked away.

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And the white light—what I had thought was headlights—blinked away with her.

After a millisecond of shock, I turned my attention to my spinning car.

The steering wheel was stuck, canted hard to the left. Hitting the brake didn't help. The tires slid across the wet asphalt. A burning-rubber smell filled the air.

In a final effort, I grabbed the parking brake and yanked on it with all my strength. The engine roared in protest, and the car skidded off the road, jolting over the deep grass on the shoulder.

I tried slamming on the brake again.

This time it worked. The tires straightened out, and the car bumped to a stop about five feet from a drainage canal.

The static from the radio died with a jagged shriek.

I put the car in park, then collapsed forward and rested my head on the steering wheel, trying to catch my breath.

Anyone else would have thought there was something wrong with the car—but I knew better. Because when I looked down at the passenger seat, I saw, resting on the upholstery...

A single yellow rose.

Just like the ones at Lydia Small's funeral.



I DIDN'T KILL LYDIA.

Yes, I was there when she died, but that's totally not the same thing.

Just try telling *her* that.

She clearly blamed me, and she showed up every couple of weeks to make sure I knew it. Up to now, she'd just been annoying—taunting me, threatening to hurt me...which might have been scary if she hadn't been such an obviously weak ghost. The most she'd been able to do was knock a textbook off my desk in class, after twenty minutes of trying.

But this—an actual attempt on my life—was new.

And it pissed me off.

I unfastened my seat belt and threw the door open, launching myself out into the rain. “Nice, Lydia!” I said, turning in a circle. “Trying to kill me? I guess you're going to have to try harder next time!”

Cold rivulets of water streamed down my face. And I realized I was crying again, which just made me angrier. I wanted to kick something. So I kicked at the wet grass and almost lost my balance.

Perfect—to slide down the bank and land in the canal would have been the absolute icing on this ghastly cake of a day.

“Come on!” I yelled. “If you want me, I'm right here! *Come and freaking get me, Lydia!*”

I was on high alert, adrenaline pumping, ready for a fight. How a ghost and a human could fight, I don't know. I guess I figured the force of my fury alone might bruise her a little.

I waited for her to show up, in all her ghostly glory, as she usually did—barely five feet tall, with long, straight black hair, wearing the clothes she died in: a torn, bloodstained, red cocktail dress and no shoes. Determined to wreck my day—if not my entire life. Slightly see-through and eternally whiny.

But she didn't come. And as my adrenaline high faded to a post-adrenaline low, I began to feel not only sort of sheepish and humiliated, but also very cold and wet.

Adding to the splendor of the scene, Kendra had pulled her car up and rolled down her window.

She looked more inconvenienced than concerned. “Alexis? Um...are you okay?”

---

Had she heard me yelling Lydia’s name?

“Yeah,” I said. “There was just...a squirrel crossing the road.”

Her eyes went wide. “Did you hit it?”

I could hear the whispers already: *Alexis Warren ran over a squirrel—on purpose!* “The squirrel is fine,” I said. “Thanks, though.”

I waved her off and got back in the car, shaking with anger and a fresh dose of mortification. As I was putting my seat belt back on, my phone rang, startling me.

It was Jared. “Hey. I forgot to wish you a Merry Christmas.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Merry Christmas.”

“All right, well...be careful. The roads are kind of slick.”

*So I noticed.* “I will, thanks. You, too.”

Then we hung up.

Feeling even emptier than before, I did a three-point turn and headed home.

Lydia appeared as I was making the left into Silver Sage Acres, the master-planned community of town houses where my family moved after our old house burned down. (Two murderous ghosts ago—old news.)

She faded into view in the passenger seat, her filthy, bloody ghost feet resting on the dashboard. “Come and get me?” she asked. “Is that some kind of joke?”

Seeing ghosts in pictures? Totally my fault, and I’m the first person to admit it. (Never to another human being, of course. Just to myself.) I’m the one who re-took the oath to the evil spirit Aralt when Lydia splashed noxious chemicals in my eyes. I thought I could beat the system—take the oath, then read another spell—one that would release him from my body again. But that was before I knew that Lydia was planning to destroy Aralt’s book—his dwelling—so she could have him to herself forever.

My eyes absorbed a healthy dose of supernatural hoodoo, and I got stuck with the consequences. Totally, totally my bad.

At least it only resulted in my being able to *see* most ghosts. Not hear their despairing, wormy-mouthed, pleading whispers.

But Lydia? I straight-up refuse to take the blame for Lydia. She got selfish at the end and died in pain and in fear, which usually produces a ghost. In this case, it produced a ghost that walks and talks and annoys me just like Lydia did when she was a real live girl. Same attitude, just deader.

When she came into view, I tensed, tightening my grip on the wheel.

But she didn’t try anything. I pulled Mom’s car into the garage and hesitated before grabbing my camera—it would mean reaching right through Lydia’s semi-opaque body. I decided to come back for it later and headed for the door to the hallway, which was always unlocked.

Lydia passed through the car door and stood in my path, both feet planted on the floor. She—and most of the other undead spirits I’d seen—preferred to move like a living person, walking and standing on the ground. Some of them float, but only when they’re too angry or distracted to think about it.

She tossed her hair and sniffed. “What makes you think I’m at your beck and call?”

I almost walked right through her, but my nerve faltered at the last second. I hated the way it felt

like jumping into a freezing swimming pool—or being pushed in. Lydia hated it, too—which almost made it worthwhile.

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But not quite.

“Move,” I said.

She came a half step closer. “Since when do I take orders from murderers?”

See what I mean? Passing the blame much? As if I’d *forced* her to start the Sunshine Club and fall madly in love with an evil spirit. As if it had been *my* idea for him to devour her life force. I’d tried to talk her out of it. I’d even tried to save her—and, rather pathetically, *kept* trying, way after the point where she was savable. But there’s no way to convey that to an angry ghost.

They just don’t listen.

“I get it, okay?” I said. “You hate me. You tried to kill me, and it didn’t work. But take comfort in the fact that you *definitely* ended my day on a low note, and move along, please. See you in a few weeks.”

Her eyebrows went up.

When she didn’t move, I held my breath and charged forward. The frigid rush of blood in my veins left me light-headed, with Lydia’s outraged yelp resonating in my ears.

What happened next took me by complete surprise.

A second blast of cold hit me from behind, and then Lydia was in front of me again.

The double dose was like a hundred full-body ice-cream headaches. I doubled over in pain, wondering if it was possible to die of ghost-induced hypothermia. My fingers were so frozen I couldn’t feel them. I stumbled, put my hands out, and sank to the floor before I could lose my balance and fall.

After a minute, the feeling of imminent freezing-to-death passed, and I looked up at Lydia. She stood on the step by the door that led into the house. The effort of passing through me had left her a little hunched over and slightly more see-through than usual. And when she spoke, her voice was weaker.

“I’ll leave you alone,” she rasped, “when I *feel* like it.”

She disappeared through the door, and I heard the light *ka-chunk* of the lock turning.

I got up a moment later, my legs like tree stumps being stuck with a million pins. The circulation gradually came back as I made my way to the door. I knocked a few times before giving up. My parents were probably in the kitchen with the TV on, so I went around to the front of the town house.

My little sister, Kasey, pulled the door open just as I was about to turn the key in the dead bolt. Her hand tightened on the doorframe when she saw me, soaked and shivering like a half-drowned rat. She, on the other hand, practically glowed, her long hair draped over her shoulder like a gold silk scarf.

Once upon a time, I’d been worried about Kasey fitting in and making friends, but that had proved to be yet another shining example of my general cluelessness about how the world works.

My sister was A-list. She’d growth-spurred over the fall, and now she was almost as tall as me. Her hair was long and caramel blond, just wavy enough to make every hairstyle look effortlessly natural. She had an innate sense of what to wear, what to say, when to laugh, how to stand, and how to tell jokes so everyone in the room would strain to hear the punch line. On top of that, she was smart. Way smarter than me.

It would have been completely insufferable, except she was so *nice*.

Even the niceness would probably have been insufferable if I hadn't been so relieved that she wasn't a total outcast.

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One per family was plenty.

Most important to me, she'd been through hard times with ghosts just like I had—but she had moved past those times. She was free from worrying about evil spirits and power centers. Free to be normal and happy.

She was safe.

And I intended to make sure that she stayed that way.

"I got caught in the rain," I said, before she could ask.

From the kitchen wafted the mixed scent of simmering spaghetti sauce and fresh-baked sugar cookies. "Get any good pictures?" Dad called.

Someone was chopping something. The *thunk* of the knife on the cutting board stopped as they waited for my answer.

"Not really," I called, careful to hover in the shadows. "I'm getting a little bored with photography, to be honest. I might cut back."

Kasey's eyes widened almost imperceptibly, but she didn't say anything. I walked past her toward my bedroom, trying to stay steady on my trembling legs.

\* \* \*

The ridiculous thing was, I knew *exactly* how to stop Lydia.

All I had to do was get up the courage to go to her house and find her power center—whatever object was holding her to this world—and destroy it, and I'd be free. Free of her, and (though I only let myself hope for this in my most desperate and pitiful of moments) maybe even free of the ghosts that haunted my photos. Who was to say the two problems weren't related?

The trouble was, when I contemplated facing Mr. and Mrs. Small, my hands began to sweat and my mind went all wobbly. Their daughter's death had basically ruined their not-so-great-to-begin-with lives. Under the weight of their desolate gazes, there was no way I'd be able to play it cool enough to concentrate on finding something that had been precious to Lydia—much less obliterating it.

The whole situation was like an itch I couldn't bear to scratch.

Lydia believed I was a murderer. The kids at school never came out and said anything, but I could see in their eyes that they suspected me, too. After all, when Lydia went running after me, she was totally alive. Five minutes later, we were alone in a fiery beauty salon together, and Lydia was dead. So her parents *had* to wonder.

And maybe what scared me most was that underneath all of my denial and nightmares and anger...some part of me might figure out it actually *was* my fault.

Here's a hint of how my life used to be: all I had wanted from the day I turned sixteen was a car. I begged, I cajoled, I bargained. Amazing how when you have a cute boyfriend and a popular best friend and everything in your life is just one peppy, perky little party, something like a car can seem really, really crucial. After everything went down with Aralt, I finally forgot about cars. I forgot to care about them, forgot to nag Mom and Dad about them.

So of course I got one for Christmas.

It was an act of profound sympathy on the part of my parents, I guess, because God knows my behavior and grades thus far in my junior year hadn't exactly been car-for-Christmas-worthy. I'd even gone back to my old habit of skipping classes on a fairly regular basis. But Mom and Dad were insanely excited, giggly and pink-cheeked. I tried to give them a little pink-faced giggling right back but I think they saw through it.

I could tell Kasey did.

The car was six years old and ugly: brown, rounded off at the corners like a bubble or an egg or something—with a big splotch on the backseat that I'd just as soon never find out the cause of, thank you very much. But it was a car. It had windows and locks and seats and a gas pedal—and it was *mine*.

I fell in love immediately.

Grandma was off windsurfing in Australia with her women's club for the holidays, so it was just the four of us—Mom, Dad, Kasey, and me. We finished opening presents in about ten minutes and ate our traditional holiday breakfast of scrambled eggs and a giant pile of artery-clogging bacon. I took my trying-too-hard parents on a drive around the neighborhood.

Then the house fell back into deathly silence.

Kasey retreated to her bedroom to talk to her boyfriend, Keaton Perry (could someone please tell me how on earth my little sister was old enough to have a boyfriend? And a *senior*, no less?), and I went to the living room and turned on the TV. The local news was playing, and the anchors were decked out in cheesy holiday sweaters. They were joking and jolly, talking about Santa Claus as if he really existed, that thing adults do to humor the kids who are mostly just humoring adults.

Then they turned serious.

"A Christmas tragedy," the female anchor said, frowning. "Surrey police are investigating the disappearance of sixteen-year-old Kendra Charnow, whose parents reported yesterday that their daughter apparently left the house in the middle of the night. The Surrey High School junior's wallet and winter coat were both left behind, and footprints found in the mud outside her window seem to suggest that she left the house barefoot."

"What?" Kasey appeared from her bedroom and plunked down onto the sofa. "Kendra?"

The cameras turned from the front of the Charnows' house to show the side yard, which was cordoned off with bright yellow crime-scene tape. A bunch of neighbors milled around as busy-looking police officers walked from the house to the street and back again.

Mom sat next to me. "You're kidding me...and on Christmas."

I was watching a woman in the background who had to be Kendra's mother. She had short reddish hair and dark circles under her eyes, and leaned heavily on the arm of the man next to her.

Then they cut to footage of Kendra's bedroom. There was crime-scene tape blocking the doorway, but they showed her unmade bed, her open window, and her dresser.

"Wait." I grabbed the remote and skipped back to the shot of the bedroom. The end of the news camera's pan settled on the surface of Kendra's dresser. What you were supposed to notice was that her purse was still there, with her wallet sitting next to it.

I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach.

Because what I noticed was the single yellow rose.



COULD LYDIA REALLY BE BEHIND THIS? Did she hate me so much that she was going after not just me but random people I knew, too?

And then it hit me: Kendra had been in the Sunshine Club.

Yet another girl who'd survived when Lydia died.

Maybe it *wasn't* just me Lydia was coming after—maybe she was planning to hunt all of us down, one at a time.

Unless someone stopped her.

*Well, it won't be me.* The thought was like a command from my subconscious. I was done playing with ghosts. Done thinking I knew how to fight them.

But who else would—who else could?—if I didn't? I was the only person who could even see Lydia.

*It's still not my problem.*

Only...the longer I thought about it, the more it kind of *looked* like my problem.

“Police are searching the densely wooded areas nearby—both the Pelham Nature Preserve and Sage Canyon are within a mile of the Charnow home,” the reporter said. “Unfortunately, though, rescuers have told us that it could take days to canvas the area—and last night's rain washed away a lot of important information.”

Pelham? That was the nature preserve where Jared and I had been. Where we'd run into Kendra the day before her parents reported her missing.

They cut to an overhead shot of the area, taken from a news helicopter.

In the upper right corner of the screen, among the trees, was a bright splotch of white. At first I thought there was something wrong with the TV, but when the camera moved, the position of the white light moved, too. So, its source was actually there in the forest.

“What *is* that?” I asked.

“What's what, honey?” Mom asked.

It was a small, glowing spot of light—like someone was aiming a really powerful flashlight directly at the screen.

I'd never seen anything like it before...except for the brilliant white light in my car. Which came immediately before Lydia's yellow rose showed up.

Because of my "special" relationship with Lydia, I could see, hear, and interact with her in ways that I couldn't with other ghosts. So it was possible that she could appear as a bright glow in photos—and on TV—when regular ghosts didn't. I didn't actually have any idea—I'd never gone out of my way to photograph her.

The helicopter spun to reveal the thin line of the highway. The light glowed on, about halfway between the main hiking trail and the road.

"What?" Kasey asked. "What are you looking for? Did you see something?"

The camera panned a little farther to reveal a billboard bearing the logo of a car dealership.

"I thought I did, but I didn't," I said, getting up off the couch and going to my room.

A few minutes later, I came back to the kitchen and found both of my parents huddled protectively near Kasey, who was on the phone with one of her dozens of friends.

"What's up?" Dad asked.

I held up my car keys. "I think I'll go for a little drive."

Kasey gave me a worried look. "Don't you want to talk to anybody? Did you call Megan?"

"Why would I call Megan?" I asked, leaning against the doorway.

"She knows Kendra. She was in the—"

"Kase," I said. "Trust me. Megan's not waiting for my call."

My parents looked stricken.

"It's fine. Don't look at me like that," I said. "I'll be home in a while."

"Where will you go?" Dad asked.

"Just...out," I said, leaving before they had a chance to ask me not to.

As I drove past the entrance to the nature preserve, I saw that the lot was choked with police cars and news vans. So I kept going, about a half-mile farther, until I came to an abandoned diner. I parked my car behind the building and backtracked on foot toward the billboard I'd seen on the news, staying close to the trees until I was directly below the sign. Then I plunged straight into the woods, my phone in my hand to keep track of my location.

I stepped over exposed roots and low, rough brush, dividing my concentration between not falling and looking for Kendra. The cold cut right through my sweater and bit into my skin. Added to that were the chills I got when I took the time to wonder what Lydia could do to someone who couldn't see her, someone she caught off guard.

Kendra might already be dead.

I kept my eye out for Lydia, but I also had my camera strapped around my neck. Every once in a while I'd take a volley of photos and search them for any sign of the bright light.

Nothing.

Finally I came to a small, rocky cliff and paused, unable to go farther without climbing down. I lifted the camera and fired off a few shots.

*Bingo.*

The photo showed the white light directly in front of me, glaringly bright.

“Lydia?” I called.

My only answer was the distant chopping of helicopter blades.

*Silent night*, I thought.

“Boo.” Lydia had materialized a few feet away from me, eyebrow cocked.

At the sound of her voice, I hurried away from the edge of the cliff.

“Merry Christmas, Alexis,” she sneered. “Get lots of presents? I’ll bet you did. I’ll bet it was *super awesome*. So tell me: did you stop for a single *minute* and think about me or my family? I’ll bet anything you didn’t. You’re completely wrapped up in yourself, as usual. And I’m just a rotting corpse in the ground.”

*But I did. Before I fell asleep last night, I thought about your mother sitting alone in the darkness, and it made me cry. Sometimes it feels like all I do is cry.*

“I wish you were just a rotting corpse.” I put my hands on my hips. “Where is she?”

“Who?”

“Kendra,” I said.

She gave me a flat stare. “What am I, a bloodhound?”

Then she vanished.

I sighed and walked back toward the cliff, turning around and carefully edging my way down, scraping the bejeezus out of my hands and balancing precariously on wobbly rocks and slick piles of gravel.

When I reached the bottom, I started to go to the right.

Lydia appeared in my path. “She’s actually behind you,” she said, tossing her hair. “Better hurry. She looks dead.”

Then she gave me a nasty glare and disappeared again.

Just as Lydia had said, Kendra was about thirty feet away. She lay on the rocks, her eyes closed and her leg canted at a sickening angle; she must have fallen and broken it.

For a second, I really did think she was dead.

I lifted her wrist and felt a faint pulse, but when I gently patted her cheek, her eyes remained tightly shut.

I pulled out my phone and prepared to dial 911.

I was trying to look up my GPS coordinates when a filthy hand lifted off the ground and rested on my arm.

“Alexis...?”

“Kendra!” I said. “Are you okay?”

“I need water.” Her eyes fluttered from the effort of opening, and her mouth made a futile swallowing motion. “Please.”

I had a bottle in my backpack. I pulled the cap off and tipped it toward her cracked lips. “Just sip,” I said. “There’s plenty. Don’t try to drink too much at once.”

She took a couple of small swallows, then stared up at me. “I’m tired.”

“Don’t worry. You’re safe. I’m going to call the police,” I said. “They’ll come save you.”

She nodded stiffly, but I could tell by the glimmer in her eyes that she was still afraid.

“What happened? Why did you come out here? Was it—” I cut myself off before I could say *Lydia*.

“I was...trying to get away from something.” Her eyes grew hazier, more distant. “I was...trying to get away from...”

“From what?” I wanted to coax the name out of her. I didn’t want to say it myself, because if I was wrong—

Kendra’s eyes suddenly went wide with fright. “From *you*, Alexis.”

I blinked.

Trying to get away from *me*?

Then, before I knew what was happening, Kendra’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she was unconscious again.

I grabbed my phone, about to call for help. But suddenly I wondered how this would look. The police might believe I’d just gone out to hike, and take pictures...but would my parents?

Would Kasey?

Not a chance.

I backed a few steps away, trying not to slip on the mossy rocks. And a thread of fear wove up through my heart, like a snake being charmed.

I couldn’t face the police. I couldn’t spend another day trying to avoid my parents’ searching gazes, lying my way through the explanation everyone would demand.

Someone would save Kendra, I would make sure of that—but I didn’t plan to be there when it happened.

If I weren’t me (oh, to be some average girl living in an average place with average problems! The magic of it!), if I were some other person looking in on me and my messed-up life, I think the obvious questions would be—why did I bother trying to keep so many secrets?

And why didn’t I ask for help?

Like Carter said after the whole Sunshine Club disaster—why didn’t I turn to him, or my parent or anyone? After all, there’s strength in numbers, right?

It’s more complicated than that.

This isn’t my first rodeo. I’ve dealt with ghosts before. And when you’re dealing with murderous spirits, more isn’t merrier. It’s not like Scooby-Doo. The amount of people you have on your side doesn’t matter. You can’t physically fight a ghost, so there’s no point in having an army of friends standing at the ready.

That just means there are more people who potentially could get hurt.

So I could go to my parents, yeah. But would they try to help me figure out what was going on? Would they help me get to the core of the situation?

No. They’d call Agent Hasan, the government agent who’d come in twice now to clean up our supernatural messes, and then they’d have Kasey and me packed into the car and on the road to some no-name town in North Dakota before lunch.

But that wouldn’t work.

I’ve learned something in my months spent inadvertently spying on ghosts: if you notice them, they notice you. If you’re aware of a ghost, it becomes aware of you.

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