



You're not dead, but you're not alive. You're a wintergirl. . . .

wintergirls

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURIE HALSE
ANDERSON

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Catalyst
The Impossible Knife of Memory
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wintergirls

LAURIE HALSE
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Version_2



To Scot—for building the fire that keeps me warm when the blizzard rages outside.



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[Persephone] was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out with both hands to take hold of the pretty plaything. And the earth, full of roads leading every which way, opened up under her. . . . She cried with a piercing voice. . . . But not one of the immortal ones, or of human mortals, heard her.

Homeric Hymn to Demeter, translated by Gregory Nagy



The King gave orders that they should let her sleep quietly till the time came for her to awake.

*The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods, by Charles Perrault, 1696,
translated by Charles Welsh*



001.00

So she tells me, the words dribbling out with the cranberry muffin crumbs, commas dunked in her coffee.

She tells me in four sentences. No, five.

I can't let me hear this, but it's too late. The facts sneak in and stab me. When she gets to the worst part

... body found in a motel room, alone . . .

... my walls go up and my doors lock. I nod like I'm listening, like we're communicating, and she never knows the difference.

It's not nice when girls die.

“We didn’t want you hearing it at school or on the news.” Jennifer crams the last hunk of muffin into her mouth. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I open the dishwasher and lean into the cloud of steam that floats out of it. I wish I could crawl in and curl up between a bowl and a plate. ~~My stepmother~~ Jennifer could lock the door, twist the dial to SCALD, and press ON.

The steam freezes when it touches my face. “I’m fine,” I lie.

She reaches for the box of oatmeal raisin cookies on the table. “This must feel awful.” She rips off the cardboard ribbon. “Worse than awful. Can you get me a clean container?”

I take a clear plastic box and lid out of the cupboard and hand it across the island to her. “Where’s Dad?”

“He had a tenure meeting.”

“Who told you about Cassie?”

She crumbles the edges of the cookies before she puts them in the box, to make it look like she baked instead of bought. “Your mother called late last night with the news. She wants you to see Dr. Parker right away instead of waiting for your next appointment.”

“What do you think?” I ask.

“It’s a good idea,” she says. “I’ll see if she can fit you in this afternoon.”

“Don’t bother.” I pull out the top rack of the dishwasher. The glasses vibrate with little screams when I touch them. If I pick them up, they’ll shatter. “There’s no point.”

She pauses in mid-crumble. “Cassie was your best friend.”

“Not anymore. I’ll see Dr. Parker next week like I’m supposed to.”

“I guess it’s your decision. Will you promise me you’ll call your mom and talk to her about it?”

“Promise.”

Jennifer looks at the clock on the microwave and shouts, “Emma—four minutes!”

~~My stepsister~~ Emma doesn’t answer. She’s in the family room, hypnotized by the television and a bowl of blue cereal.

Jennifer nibbles a cookie. “I hate to speak ill of the dead, but I’m glad you didn’t hang out with her anymore.”

I push the top rack back in and pull out the bottom. “Why?”

“Cassie was a mess. She could have taken you down with her.”

I reach for the steak knife hiding in the nest of spoons. The black handle is warm. As I pull it free, the blade slices the air, dividing the kitchen into slivers. There is Jennifer, packing store-bought cookies in a plastic tub for her daughter's class. There is Dad's empty chair, pretending he has no choice about these early meetings. There is the shadow of my mother, who prefers the phone because face-to-face takes too much time and usually ends in screaming.

Here stands a girl clutching a knife. There is grease on the stove, blood in the air, and angry words piled in the corners. We are trained not to see it, not to see any of it.

... body found in a motel room, alone . . .

Someone just ripped off my eyelids.

"Thank God you're stronger than she was." Jennifer drains her coffee mug and wipes the crumbs from the corners of her mouth.

The knife slides into the butcher block with a whisper. "Yeah." I reach for a plate, scrubbed free of blood and gristle. It weighs ten pounds.

She snaps the lid on the box of cookies. "I have a late settlement appointment. Can you take Emma to soccer? Practice starts at five."

"Which field?"

"Richland Park, out past the mall. Here." She hands the heavy mug to me, her lipstick a bloody crescent on the rim. I set it on the counter and unload the plates one at a time, arms shaking.

Emma comes into the kitchen and sets her cereal bowl, half-filled with sky-colored milk, next to the sink.

"Did you remember the cookies?" she asks her mother.

Jennifer shakes the plastic container. "We're late, honey. Get your stuff."

Emma trudges toward her backpack, her sneaker laces flopping. She should still be sleeping, but my father's wife drives her to school early four mornings a week for violin lessons and conversational French. Third grade is not too young for enrichment, you know.

Jennifer stands up. The fabric of her skirt is pulled so tight over her thighs, the pockets gape open. She tries to smooth out the wrinkles. "Don't let Emma con you into buying chips before practice. If she's hungry, she can have a fruit cup."

"Should I stick around and drive her home?"

She shakes her head. "The Grants will do it." She takes her coat off the back of the chair, puts her arms in the sleeves, and starts to button up. "Why don't you have one of the muffins? I bought oranges yesterday, or you could have toast or frozen waffles."

~~Because I can't let myself want them~~

because I don't need a muffin (410), I don't want an orange (75) or toast (87), and waffles (180) make me gag.

I point to the empty bowl on the counter, next to the huddle of pill bottles and the Bluberridazzle pops box. "I'm having cereal."

Her eyes dart to the cabinet where she had taped up my meal plan. It came with the discharge papers when I moved in six months ago. I took it down three months later, on my eighteenth birthday.

"That's too small to be a full serving," she says carefully.

~~I could eat the entire box~~ I probably won't even fill the bowl. "My stomach's upset."

She opens her mouth again. Hesitates. A sour puff of coffee-stained morning breath blows across the still kitchen and splashes into me. *Don't say it—don't say it.*

"Trust, Lia."

He said it.

"That's the issue. Especially now. We don't want . . ."

If I weren't so tired, I'd shove ~~trust~~ and ~~issue~~ down the garbage disposal and let it run all day.

I pull a bigger bowl out of the dishwasher and put it on the counter. "I. Am. Fine. Okay?"

She blinks twice and finishes buttoning her coat. "Okay. I understand. Tie your sneakers, Emma, and get in the car."

Emma yawns.

"Hang on." I bend down and tie Emma's laces. Double-knotted. I look up. "I can't keep doing this, you know. You're way too old."

She grins and kisses my forehead. "Yes you can, silly."

As I stand up, Jennifer takes two awkward steps toward me. I wait. She is a pale, round moth, dusted with eggshell foundation, armed for the day with her banker's briefcase, purse, and remote starter for the leased SUV. She flutters, nervous.

I wait.

This is where we should hug or kiss or pretend to.

She ties the belt around her middle. "Look . . . just keep moving today. Okay? Try not to think about things too much."

"Right."

"Say good-bye to your sister, Emma," Jennifer prompts.

"Bye, Lia." Emma waves and gives me a small berridazzle smile. "The cereal is really good. You can finish the box if you want."

003.00

I pour too much cereal (150) in the bowl, splash on the two-percent milk (125). Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Breakfast will make me a cham-pee-on.

... When I was a real girl, with two parents and one house and no blades flashing, breakfast was granola topped with fresh strawberries, always eaten while reading a book propped up on the fruit bowl. At Cassie's house we'd eat waffles with thin syrup that came from maple trees, not the fake corn syrup stuff, and we'd read the funny pages. . . .

No. I can't go there. I won't think. I won't look.

I won't pollute my insides with Bluberri-dazzle pops or muffins or scritch-scratchy shards of toast, either. Yesterday's dirt and mistakes have moved through me. I am shiny and pink inside, clean. Empty is good. Empty is strong.

But I have to drive.

. . . I drove last year, windows down, music cranked, first Saturday in October, flying to the SATs. I drove so Cassie could put the top coat on her nails. We were secret sisters with a plan for world domination, potential bubbling around us like champagne. Cassie laughed. I laughed. We were perfection.

Did I eat breakfast? Of course not. Did I eat dinner the night before, or lunch, or anything?

The car in front of us braked as the traffic light turned yellow, then red. My flip-flop hovered above the pedal. My edges blurred. Black squiggle tingles curled up my spine and wrapped around my eyes like a silk scarf. The car in front of us disappeared. The steering wheel, the dashboard, vanished. There was no Cassie, no traffic light. How was I supposed to stop this thing?

Cassie screamed in slow motion.

::Marshmallow/air/explosion/bag::

When I woke up, the EMT-person and a cop were frowning. The driver whose car I smashed into was screaming into his cell phone.

My blood pressure was that of a cold snake. My heart was tired. My lungs wanted a nap. They stuck me with a needle, inflated me like a state-fair balloon, and shipped me off to a hospital with steel-eyed nurses who wrote down every bad number. In pen. Busted me.

Mom and Dad rushed in, side by side for a change, happy that I was not dead. A nurse handed my chart to my mother. She read through it and explained the disaster to my father and then they fought, a mudslide of an argument that spewed across the antiseptic sheets and out into the hall. I was stressed/overscheduled/manic/ no—depressed/no—in need of attention/no

—in need of discipline/in need of rest/in need/your fault/your fault/ fault/fault. They branded their war on this tiny skin-bag of a girl.

Phone calls were made. My parents force-marched me into ~~hell on the hill~~ New Seasons. . . .

Cassie escaped, as usual. Not a scratch. Insurance more than covered the damage, so she wound up with a fixed car and new speakers. Our mothers had a little talk, but really all girls go through these things and what are you going to do? Cassie rescheduled for the next test and got her nails done at a salon, Enchanted Blue, *while they locked me up and dripped sugar water into my empty veins*. . . .

Lesson learned. Driving requires fuel.

Not Emma's Bluberridazzlepop cereal. I shiver and pour most of the soggy mess down the disposal, then set the bowl on the floor. Emma's cats, Kora and Pluto, pad across the kitchen and stick their heads in the bowl. I draw a cartoon face with a big tongue on a sticky note, write YUMMY, EMMA! THANKS! and slap it on the cereal box.

I eat ten raisins (16) and five almonds (35) and a green-bellied pear (121) (= 172). The bites crawl down my throat. I eat my vitamins and the crazy seeds that keep my brain from exploding: one long purple, one fat white, two poppy-red. I wash everybody down with hot water.

They better work quick. The voice of a dead girl is waiting for me on my phone.

The climb upstairs takes longer than usual.

I sleep at the far end of the hall, in the tiny space still decorated like a guest room. White walls. Yellow curtains. The sofa bed is never folded up, the desk came from a yard sale. Jennifer keeps offering to buy me new furniture, and paint or put up wallpaper. I tell her I haven't figured out what I want to do yet. I should probably unpack the stacks of dusty boxes first.

My phone is waiting on top of the pile of dirty clothes, right where it landed when I chucked it at the wall early Sunday morning because the constant ringing was making me crazy and I was too tired to turn it off.

. . . *The last time she called* me was six months ago, after I got out of the hospital for the second time. I'd been calling her four or five times a day, but she wouldn't pick up or call me back, until finally, she did.

She asked me to listen and told me this wouldn't take long.

I was the root of all evil, Cassie said. A negative influence, a toxic shadow. While I was locked up, her parents had dragged her to a doctor who washed her brain and weighed her down with pills and empty words. She needed to move on with her life, redefine her boundaries, she said. I was the reason she cut classes and failed French, the cause of everything nasty and dangerous.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

I was the reason she didn't run away freshman year. I was the reason she didn't eat a bottle of sleeping pills when her boyfriend cheated on her. I listened for hours when her parents yelled and tried to stuff her into a mannequin shell that didn't fit. I understood what triggered her earthquakes, most of them. I knew how much it hurt to be the daughter of people who can't see you, not even if you are standing in front of them stomping your feet.

But remembering all that was too complicated for Cassie. It was easier for her to dump me one last time. She turned my summer into a desert wasteland. When school started, she looked right through me in the halls, her new friends draped around her neck like Mardi Gras necklaces. *She wiped me off the face of her existence.*



But something happened. In the dead time between Saturday night and Sunday morning, she called me.

Of course I didn't pick up. She was drunk-dialing, or prank-dialing. I wasn't going to let her sucker me into being her friend again just so she could turn around and crush me one more

time.

... body found in a motel room, alone . . .

I didn't pick up. I didn't listen to her messages yesterday. I was too angry to even look at the phone.

She's still waiting for me.

I sit down on the mound of unwashed pajama bottoms and sweatshirts and dig out the phone. Open it. Cassie called thirty-three times, starting at 11:30 Saturday night.

RETRIEVE VOICE MAIL

"Lia? It's me. Call me."

Cassie.

Second message: "Where are you? Call me back." Cassie.

Third: "I'm not playing, Overbrook. I really need to talk to you."

Cassie, two days ago, Saturday.

"Call me."

"Please, please, call me."

"Look, I'm sorry I was such a bitch. Please."

"I know you're getting these messages."

"You can be mad at me later, okay? I really need to talk to you."

"You were right—it wasn't your fault."

"There's nobody else to talk to."

"Oh, God."

From 1:20 to 2:55, she hung up fifteen times.

Next: "Please, Lia-Lia." Her voice was slurring.

"I'm so sad. I can't get out."

"Call me. It's a mess."

Two more hang-ups.

3:20, very slurred: "I don't know what to do."

3:27. "I miss you. Miss you."

I bury the phone at the bottom of the pile and put on a heavier sweatshirt before I head for my car. Winter comes early in New Hampshire.